Something Wicked

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There is something in the sewers...

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Something Wicked

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CH 1

Something Wicked

Chapter One

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

(Ray Bradbury)

Crystal water turns to dark

Where ere its presence leaves it mark

And boiling currents pound like drums

When something wicked this way comes

A presence dark invades the fair

And gives the horses ample scare

Chaos rains and panic fills the air

When something wicked this way comes....

Ill winds mark its fearsome flight,

And autumn branches creak with fright.

The landscape turns to ashen crumbs,

When something wicked this way comes...

Flowers bloom as black as night

Removing color from your sight

Nightmarish vines block your way

Thorns reach out to catch their prey

And by the pricking of your thumbs

Realize that their poison numbs

From frightful blooms, rank odors seep

Bats and beasties fly and creep

'Cross this evil land, ill winds blow

Despite the darkness, mushrooms glow

All will rot and decompose

For something wicked this way grows...

Mark stepped into the dank, up to his knees in the murky water. Young and unaccustomed to the dangers, going on a dare. What friends he had, to send him down there. And for what? The chance to join a club, a chance to belong...

I should have thought this through...

He stepped forward, trudging through the water, shining his flashlight back and forth at the shadows. The goal was a simple one - just pick up a box. Then he'd be in. It was that easy, that simple. He didn't ask what was in it, he didn't want to know. He just wanted to get the box and get out of the sewer. He stopped at a junction in the tunnel and looked left, then right. Which way had they said to go? He couldn't remember.

He heard a noise up the left side and jumped back, pressing himself to the concrete wall and holding his breath. Then he smiled. So, that was it... they were there. They were going to try and scare him. That

was the initiation, not getting the box. There probably wasn't a box at all, they were probably crouching, hiding... waiting for him to step down the tunnel so they could jump out and scare him.

If that's what it takes, he thought, *at least now I won't be scared when they do it.*

He pushed himself off the wall, turning left and walking slowly, expecting them to jump out at any moment. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. He'd be ready for it, and he would see to it that they wouldn't have the satisfaction of frightening him. He was already scared... he just wouldn't let them see it. He heard the water slosh behind him and drew his eyebrows together, continuing on his path. Was it Neal? Probably - Ronnie wouldn't have been able to keep himself from laughing at that point. Mark smiled as he heard the sloshing grow nearer. He felt something touch his shoulder...

Mark spun around and shined his flashlight into a white face - pure white with eyes ringed in black. He jumped back, slipping and falling in the water. His flashlight flew out of his hand, sinking beside him. Waterproof, its light shone on.

"Jesus!" Mark yelled, putting a hand on his chest. He looked up at the white face, which was now contorted into a wide grin. "Neal! You ass!"

Neal laughed out loud and leaned against he sewer wall, bending over and slapping his knees. "You are such a wimp!" he yelled, his words echoing down the long tunnels.

Mark grimaced and stood, reaching down to pick up his flashlight. He was soaking wet up to the waist, his jeans heavy and dirty with sewer grime. *So much for not giving them the satisfaction...*

"There's probably no damn box, either," he growled, angry at himself for getting scared by something he knew was coming.

"Heh! You should have seen the look on your face!" Neal said, wrapping an arm over his dripping-wet friend. "That was precious! Bet you wet your pants! Eh... not that you could tell now!"

"Shut up."

"Awe... poor sport," he said between fits of laughter. "C'mon... if it makes you feel better, you're in."

"It doesn't."

"Fine... whatever," he started walking back down the tunnel. "But you're still in. C'mon, let's go find Ronnie."

Mark walked beside Neal, his light shone out before them. "Is Ron down here?"

"Are you kidding? He's scared of the dark."

"He is? I didn't know that."

"Big, tough, six-foot-five, hockey-playing Ron? Yup. Turns into a bowl of Jell-o if he has to sleep without a nightlight."

Mark smiled. Now, at least, he had something on Ronnie. Perhaps he'd be able to get something to scare Neal with, too. Not that it would be an easy task, at times it seemed as if nothing scared him. They turned the corner and trudged to the ladder that led up to the manhole that Mark had climbed down. Neal looked at him and grinned before putting a foot on the first rung.

"Man, I got you good!"

"Shut up."

Neal stopped and looked down the tunnel, squinting to see something there in the darkness. He climbed down the ladder and took Mark's flashlight without a word, shining it down the way.

Something darker than the shadows slipped into the water, making no waves. Neal looked at Mark and struck a crooked smile.

"Let's check this out."

"No. Come on, lets just get out of here."

"No way... this is cool," Neal walked away from the ladder, taking short strides to where the darkness had gone under.

Mark tightened his grip on the side of the ladder and then sighed. This was a part of the initiation... just another scare. *Fine,* he thought, running to cach up to his friend. He fell into step along side and stopped when the other did.

Neal shone the light down into the water, but mud and sludge ran along with the slow current and they couldn't see beyond the surface. He aimed the flashlight into the shadows and backed up a step, uncertain.

"Uh, yeah. Let's go," he said.

"You aren't scared, are you?" Mark asked, smiling. ***I** am...*

"No, I'm not scared," Neal turned back towards the ladder and began walking quickly. "It was probably a rat or something..."

The light swung into the darkness, falling upon a looming hulk in the shadows. The form bounded forward, reaching for Neal's throat. The teen screamed out and dropped the flashlight, running for the ladder. Left alone, Mark backed up to the wall and gasped. Then he heard something... something like the sound of laughter...

"Ronnie, you jerk!" Mark yelled. He looked over at Neal, who was chuckling again.

"Hah! Strike two!"

Ron pulled the black t-shirt off his head and threw it onto a pipe. "We wouldn't do this to you if we didn't like ya, kid..." he said, giggling.

"Oh, by the way," Neal said. "Ron's not afraid of the dark."

"No kidding."

Ronnie chucked his young friend in the arm and mussed his hair. "Hey, man, you're all wet. Let's get up to the street before you catch your death down here."

"Right... I owe you guys big."

They started walking towards Neal, who was already climbing the ladder.

"Wait," Ron said, turning around and grabbing his shirt off the pipe.

Mark bit his lip, looking at the dry fabric. "I thought you went under the water," he said.

"In the sewer? Are you high?"

They heard a splash and turned back towards the ladder, looking at Neal where he sat in the water, having slipped off the wet rungs. He smiled sheepishly and shrugged. His eyes widened and he jumped to his feet, scrambling for the ladder again.

"What?" Mark asked.

He heard the sound of a breath being suddenly drawn and turned to look at Ronnie. The big man was standing perfectly still, his eyes wide and mouth open. A trickle of blood fell from the crease of his lips and he let out a choking sound, a deep fluid gurgle. He reached out a hand towards the younger man and fell forward, splashing face-first in the murky water. Mark gasped and stepped back, looking at the deep hole in Ron's back.

"Jesus!" He yelled, kneeling down.

Something came out of the darkness and hit him, sending him flying into the sewer wall. Mark shook his head and watched in horror as a pair of white eyes glared at him through the pitch. They moved closer, unblinking, nearly luminescent in the shadows. He cowered back, but could not draw himself to look away. It stepped into the light and he let out a scream.

The thing walked intently towards him, a bloody length of jagged metal in its right hand and something small and dark in its left. Mark looked closer and saw that the object was a dead rat, he shook and leaned forward, throwing up into the water. The thing lifted the rat to his mouth and sank its teeth into it, tearing away a chunk of fur and flesh and spitting it towards the frightened teen, then it brought the rat back up to its face and lapped away the flowing blood.

Mark covered his face and pressed his back against the wall of the sewer. He couldn't hear anything, but he knew it was there, growing closer. He pressed his palms harder to his eyes.

Jesus... Jesus, no...

The thing grabbed hold of the boys hair and lifted him up. Mark cried out in pain and terror as it shook him and tossed him into the water two meters away. He struggled to turn and look at it again; it was stepping forward, shaking the rat and bearing its teeth. Blood flew from the dead rodent, spattering on the young man's face, he wiped it away and slid backwards through the sludge.

"Mine!" it yelled in a rough voice. "People..! People not take mine!"

"No!" Mark yelled, tears rolling down his cheeks. "No! I won't take it! I promise!"

The creature tilted it's mud-covered face down towards the teen and spit blood into his eye. "People... go! Go, people!"

Mark sat shaking in the cold water, the thing lifted him up by the arm and pushed him into the wall. The boy finally understood that it was

letting him leave, he looked up towards the manhole that Neal had escaped by, but the creature was standing between him and that way. It didn't want him to go up, it just wanted him to go. He backed away, into the darkness, watching as the thing tore away another chunk of the rat's skin and began to chew. He covered his mouth and turned, running as fast as he could.

His heart was pounding in his chest and his side was beginning to hurt, but he refused to stop, he refused to let the thing catch up to him. For all he knew it was following him right now, gaining on him, waiting for him to tumble. Prey in a game of cat and mouse. Or maybe it had turned its attentions to Ronnie... maybe that evil spawn was at that moment sinking it's sharpened, blood-stained teeth into the body of his friend.

Mark stopped and fell to his knees, throwing up again. He spun around, searching the tunnel for the creature. A hand flew out of the darkness and hauled the boy against a wall. He screamed and looked at the thing before him. It was different, but his mind could not discern how. It was the same creature, it had to be... it had changed itself somehow, transformed. It was green, it's face half hidden by an orange mask, its eyes graced with blue irises - no longer the red-tinged white orbs he had just been staring into.

"Hey, take it easy!" it yelled, its voice different... more human. "Calm down!

He punched at it, but it easily dodged the blow and caught both of the teen's hands in one of its own. Mark began to shake and threw his head back, striking it against the concrete. For a second his eyes darted around him and then his lids closed, he fell deep into unconsciousness. Just before the moment that his mind turned to black, he wondered if the thing was just going to kill him - or if it was still hungry...

"Where did he come from?"

"I dunno... I just found him. Poor kid was scared half to death. Knocked himself out."

"Where?"

"Just outside. He damn near made it to our front door."

"I wonder what happened to him."

"Is he bleeding bad, Don?"

"Doesn't look to me like he's bleeding at all."

"Okay... then what's all that red stuff on his face and in his hair?"

"Blood. But it isn't his."

"Betch'a he's got an interesting story to tell."

"Hang on, guys... it looks like he's waking up..."

Mark rolled his head to the side and listened, half aware. There were voices - four of them. Someone found him, he understood that much. Thank God the creature hadn't decided to kill him. He blinked and opened his eyes, squinting in the new glare. Through his clouded vision and sleep-invaded mind he saw four figures standing not a meter away, staring down at him. He managed to focus his eyes and immediately wished that he hadn't.

He screamed, sitting up and pushing himself back. His hand beneath him met with the air and he tumbled off the bed and landed with a thud on the floor. He didn't stop to worry about whether or not he had injured himself, he was more concerned about what might be done to him if he didn't get away. There wasn't just one monster, there were four now... maybe all hungry... and they were all walking towards him. He curled himself into a ball and started rocking back and forth, reciting to himself *The Lord's Prayer* and desperately hoping that this was all a dream. He slapped himself in the forehead, trying to wake himself from his nightmare.

"Hey... cut it out," one of the things said. "You're gonna hurt yourself, kid."

He felt a hand touch his arm and jumped to his feet, running around the room in aimless circles, watching the four as he searched for a way out. He ran into something and fell, head over feet, and looked up again at the four monstrous green faces that looked almost... amused? Confused, maybe. One of them folded its arms and stepped forward, tilting its head to the side. It had on a blue mask and something strapped to its back. Back? Shell... a monster turtle. Mark shuffled back and held his hands up, slapping at the air, trying to frighten the thing away.

"Are you okay?" it asked, sounding almost concerned.

Mark put his hands down and leaned his head against the wall, crying. "Please..." he said weakly. "Please... I'm sorry... I don't want your food! Don't eat me..."

The blue-masked turtle-monster glanced at its companions and shrugged, then looked back at the shaking human. "Don't worry, I'm a vegetarian."

The boy looked up and hugged his knees to his chest. "What the hell is going on here? What are you things!?"

The creature kneeled beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. Mark jumped and pulled away, but managed a look into the things eyes. Real eyes... almost human eyes. He let the thing rest its hand on him again without pulling back. Its touch was gentle, calming. This wasn't the same thing that had killed his friend - it couldn't be.

"My name's Leonardo," it said, moving aside so the boy could see the other three. "We aren't going to hurt you. What's your name?"

The human's mouth dropped open and he slammed it shut, frowning. "I... uh, Mark..."

"Mark? Your name is Mark?"

He nodded and struggled to his feet, pressing his back to the wall. "What are you things? What happened to Ronnie?"

Three of the turtles looked at the one with the orange mask. "Don't look at me, he's all I found," it told them, shrugging.

The one called Leonardo turned back to the teen. "We don't know what happened to your friend," it said. "But maybe we can help you find out. Now, what happened to you?"

"First tell me what you are..."

Leonardo nodded and motioned for the human to sit back down on the bed he had so hastily vacated. Mark side-stepped to it and sat down, never once drawing his eyes from the things in the room.

"Its a long story," the creature said. It seemed to be the leader of the four. "I can't get into it right now, but I will tell you that we aren't going to hurt you and that we just want to help." It motioned towards the others, who stepped forward. "These are my brothers, Donatello, Raphael, and Michaelangelo."

"Hi," Michaelangelo said with a little wave. "Remember me?"

Mark wrinkled his brow and looked closer. The orange mask, the voice... the creature that he'd encountered in the tunnel. The one with the blue eyes.

"Uh... hi... *Michaelangelo* ?"

"Call me Mike."

"You things... uh... you guys are..."

"...Turtles?" the one in purple said.

"...Ninjas?" the red-masked one added.

Mark tilted his head. "...Smart."

"He's talking about me, you know," Mike said, sitting beside the boy. "Hey, don't let Leo's formality throw you. That's Raph and Don."

Mark hung his head and held it in his hands. "I don't know what the hell is going on here..."

"Try to tell us what happened to you," Leo said. "Can you remember it all?"

"...Yes," Mark looked up into Mike's eyes and bit down. "It... it was..." he started to shake and Mike put a hand on his shoulder, calming him. He took a breath and continued. "It killed Ronnie."

"What killed him?" Raph asked.

"I don't know. Something... something bad."

Don steepled his fingers. "Do you remember what it looked like? Anything at all?"

"Not much... it was dark. The thing, I mean... it... it had white eyes. Its face was all muddy. Its whole body was muddy. It had these teeth..."

"How big was it?" Raph pressed.

"Not too big... but I was looking up at it. I don't know, I'm not sure."

Leo nodded. "Anything else?"

Mark rubbed his eyes. "It was eating. It told me not to take its food... I think that's what it meant."

"What food?"

"...A rat... it was eating a rat."

Don felt his stomach churn. "So, it spoke to you?" he asked, fighting back the nausea.

"Kind of... it sounded, I dunno', like a kid or something. Its voice was deep, but it didn't seem like it knew how to talk. Like it was just learning."

"Like a kid, eh?" Raph asked, drawing something out of his belt.

Mark looked at the blade and gasped, jumping full onto the bed and cowering behind Mike. Raph looked at his sai and then into the admonishing faces of his brothers.

"What?"

"Put that away," Leo said. "You're scaring him."

Raph rolled his eyes and pushed the weapon back into his belt. He stepped up to Mike and glanced behind at the human hiding there. "Hey, c'mon out. Sorry I scared you."

Mark slid back to where he had just been sitting, but kept a hand on Mike's arm. "I'm... I'm sorry. I remembered the thing... it had a knife or something. It stabbed Ronnie with it."

Leonardo motioned with his head and his three brothers joined him standing before Mark.

"We'll check this out," Leo said.

Mark shook his head. "Thank you... thank you..."

"What about the kid?" Raphael inquired.

"I will care for him."

The turtles and human all looked towards the door and Mark screamed again, leaping off the bed and running behind Mike. He

peeked past the ninja's green shoulder at the large rat that stood there.

"Now what?" he yelled. "What the hell is that thing?"

"Hey, take it easy," Mike said, stepping aside and guiding Mark into the open. "This is Master Splinter."

"... *Master* ?" the teen asked, stepping forward stiff-legged as Mike urged him on. "He... he's your master? Like, your boss..?"

"You could say that."

"Thank you, Sensei," Leo said, bowing.

"Mark?" Mike said.

The kid turned. "Yes..?"

"You're going to have to tell us where this happened."

Mark's directions had been confused and uncertain, but the turtles managed to figure out most of the path with little effort. They stepped through the water quietly, watching the shadows for any sign of movement, listening for any breaths other than their own. At long last they came to the place that the human had told them about, an open manhole by a junction - and a flashlight in the water. But that was all they found there.

"Split up," Leo commanded. "Search the area. Stay on your toes, Brothers - we don't know what we're gonna' find here."

"We probably won't find anything," Raph growled. "Anybody stop to consider that this kid might be stone crazy?"

"I don't think so," Mike said, feeling around the bottom of his water with his foot. "You should have seen the look on his face when I caught him in the tunnel."

"I'd be scared if I saw you, too," Raphael said, smiling. "Yer' ugly mug..."

"You ain't no Chippendale yourself."

"You guys be quiet," Don said in a whisper. "This is serious."

Leonardo shook his head, sometimes his brothers could be quite a handful. They all walked around the area quietly, looking for something that they didn't want to see and weren't even certain existed. Even so, Mark's story had been an eerie one, short though it might have been, and it hung in all their minds. The thought that there was possibly a rat-eating, human-killing, dark and evil *something* so close to their homes...

Leo stepped on something and stopped, lifting up his foot. He reached down under the murky water and felt around, he found the object and brought it up out of the sludge. His eyes grew wide and he threw it onto a nearby ledge, staring at it and trying to keep his stomach from revolting.

"Guys! Here! Now!" he bellowed, his voice echoing off the tunnel walls.

He heard the sound of two sets of feet running through the water and looked up to see as Mike and Don came near.

"Where's Raph?"

"He went down that long tunnel on the right of the junction," Don said.

Leo took a breath. "We're going to have to find him. We all need to stick together."

"Why? What happened?" Mike asked, stepping closer to his nervous brother.

Leo drew his swords and pointed one of them towards the concrete ledge. A human arm lay there, its end snapped and the muscle macerated. Mike put his hand on his mouth and turned towards Leo.

"That's all you found?"

"Maybe that's all that's left..." Don added, his own face registering disgust.

Leo kept his eyes on the remains for a long moment before turning back towards his brothers. "Let's go find Raph."

Raphael crouched in the darkness and gripped his sai tightly to his chest, listening for evidence of the creature that the human teen had been so frightened of. So far the turtle could see and hear nothing, but he sensed a presence. A *something* there, in the pitch, in the quiet. It was there...

He jumped at a sound, the echoed voice of Leonardo calling him and the others back. He let out a long-held breath and stood in the water. He couldn't quite feel the thing anymore - just the slightest, as if it were farther away now. He turned down the tunnel and took a step back, twirling his sai to a striking position. White eyes glared at him from out of the darkness, rhythmically moving up and down with each of the creatures breaths. But what breath? Raphael still couldn't hear any breath...

He took the offensive and dove forward, thrusting his weapon towards where the hidden creature's stomach would be. His momentum sent him sprawling to the tunnel floor and he spun around, launching himself back to his feet and looking towards the creature. It was gone. He twisted himself around, tensing his muscles and listening through the darkness. It wasn't the hearing that told him it was behind, it was the sensing. He didn't turn, but took a step forward - trying to confuse the thing with the action. With each step it remained behind, just there - less than a meter from his shell. But he didn't hear it, he couldn't smell it... he knew it was there.

"Raph?"

The turtle spun around, hearing Donatello's voice from far down the tunnel. The creature wasn't behind him, where he had sensed it. It was gone - or perhaps it had never been. *I know it wasn't just my damn imagination,* he thought, stepping towards where his brother's voice had come from. He took another step, then another, glancing left and right at the shadows as he went along. He picked up his pace and began to run, taking long strides through the knee-deep water in an effort to get to Donatello and the others. He stopped and pressed himself to the wall. He felt it again.

"Hey, Raph?" Mike stepped out of the shadows. "You okay, man?"

Raphael grabbed Mike by the arm and pulled him along as he began to run again. "Where's Leo and Don?"

"Right here," Leonardo said as he and the other turtle came into view. "What's going on? Did you see something?"

"Let's get the hell out of here."

"What is it?" Don asked as they all began to run. "What did you see?"

"I didn't *see* anything. I saw eyes, that's all."

"Wait," Leo said as they rounded a corner. "Did you or didn't you..?"

"It **wasn't** there. It was there, but it wasn't..."

Mike stopped and took hold of Raph's arm, pulling him to a halt. The others took a couple more steps before bringing themselves back around.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Listen," Raph said, crouching. "It was there. I felt it, I *sensed* it. I couldn't see anything more than a pair of damned white eyes. I didn't

hear anything, I didn't smell anything..."

Leo and the others joined Raph near the ground. "Are you sure?"

"Don't ask stupid questions, lets just get the hell back to the den." He looked into their faces. "What has **you** guys so scared?"

Don stood and gripped his bo tightly. "We found what was left of lunch."

Raph dove into the darkness behind Don, slashing out with his sai.

"What?" Mike asked, watching as Raph stepped back beside them. "What now?"

Raph shrugged. "This has me spooked," he admitted. "I just attacked a freakin rat."

"I hope you won," Mike joked.

Raphael crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. His stance suddenly changed back to defensive and he signaled his brothers with his eyes. It was there. Looks from the others showed that they could not feel it, could not sense it. Maybe they thought he was crazy. Only he was aware of its presence - and only he knew just where it was. But it wasn't behind him, wasn't stalking him as it had been before - it was after one of the others, silently seeking an opening for attack.

"Everybody," Raph said in a low voice. "Shells in."

Leo didn't question, he could see the uncommon fear in his brother's eyes. He nodded and the others joined the formation, each with his shell towards the others, each weapon drawn, each eye scanning the darkness.

Raphael stuck one of his sai back in his belt and reached to his left, wrapping his hand around Mike's wrist.

"What?" Mike whispered.

Raph leaned over and smelled his brother. "Blood," he said, stepping in front of the other turtle. "You smell like blood. Human and rat..."

Michaelangelo lifted his arm and smelled it, his eyes widening. "Mark touched me."

"...More than the rest of us," Leo added. "Mike, stay between us. Everybody, we have to get back to the den."

They all started walking back towards their home, watching left and right, fore and back for a sign of the creature. They didn't know what it was, they didn't know what it looked like - but they knew it existed, and they knew that it was capable of murder. And they knew that it was near. Raph's face flew up and he spun around, looking at Mike, who was walking just behind him. It was too late - it was ready.

A dark form leaped out of the shadows, landing on Michaelangelo and pounding him into the concrete floor. It jumped off and stepped its foot down on his chest, pushing him harder into the sludge. Mike fought for breath and grabbed hold of the foot, twisting and sending the creature spinning away. It splashed down in the water and the other three turtles were immediately upon it, grabbing furiously for the flailing limbs. It slipped easily away from their assault and broke again for Mike, who was struggling to his feet.

"Mikey, look out!" Don yelled, regaining his own footing.

The warning did little good as Mike was grabbed by the arm and thrown into the wall. The creature did not let go, but swung the ninja around again, using him as a weapon to knock the turtles down as they charged forward to help. They tumbled one over the other, landing in a tangled heap on the sewer floor. Before they were able to stand and come to his aid, Mike was struck against the wall again. His head hit hard and rolled back, his eyes closed.

The shaded creature bounded down the tunnel, dragging Michaelangelo by the arm through the water. It stopped and threw him onto a ledge, growling and sniffing the air. The turtle moaned

and rolled his head to the side and the creature jumped up on top of him, squatting on his plastron and sniffing again. It reached down a mud-covered hand and hit him on the side of the head and Mike blinked, looking up into the white-out eyes. He couldn't see its face past the sludge and shadows, though it was just centimeters away, breathing on his face, inhaling the scent...

"...People..." it hissed. "...People smell... where people..."

It was a question, the thing was asking where the smell of human blood had come from - where Mark was. Mike grunted, trying to breathe beneath the creature's pressing weight. It wrapped its hands around his throat and pushed down on his main artery, blocking off the flow of blood. The turtle reached up weakly, brushing the thing's face with the tips of his fingers. His head grew light and he fought for consciousness, trying with all of his diminished strength to push the creature off of him. It squeezed tighter and Mike's vision dimmed; he let his hands fall to the concrete and his fingers twitched, the only movement left within him. A blackness surrounded him and a wave of cold traveled its way up his body - then he felt it release him, the hands let loose of his throat. Weakly, he looked up at the thing as his vision returned; it was looking down the tunnel, its white eyes twitching in the faint light.

The creature shifted its gaze back to the drained turtle and jumped off his chest. Mike drew in a deep breath and rolled to his side, coughing as he stared at the thing. It crouched and hissed, launching itself at him and digging its teeth into the flesh on his arm. He yelled in pain and pulled back, spinning on his shell and kicking the creature in the head. It faltered back and slashed out with a clawed hand, contacting the turtle in the face and slashing through the skin on his cheek.

Michaelangelo pulled himself to his feet and jumped ahead, the creature caught him by the arm and spun around, throwing him up against the ceiling. The ninja splashed down into the water and sat up, shaking his head and watching it as it walked intently towards him, out of the shadows. He slid back, eyeing the creature with a

horrible sense of recognition. Mike could hear voices, his brothers growing near; but his mind and thoughts were on the sight ahead. He stood and took a stance, uncertain of every action even as he took it.

The thing moved quickly, grabbing Mike by the throat. This time it didn't squeeze, it lifted him, slamming his head into the corner of the concrete ledge. It did it again, harder, breaking the skin on the turtle's forehead and sending a stream of blood down between his eyes; then again, and Michaelangelo went limp. It threw him to the sewer floor, walking away and leaving him face-down in the water. Mike tried to lift his head, to get himself to stand - but he couldn't move and couldn't stop himself from breathing. Water filled his lungs as he lay motionless, unable to help himself - his mind drifting farther back to darkness with each damning breath. He took another and closed his eyes, feeling the cold sleep descend.

Continued in Chapter Two

CH 2

Something Wicked

Chapter Two

"Which way?" Raphael yelled.

There were three possible paths before them, only one would lead to their brother and the creature that had taken him. A few seconds before they came to the fork in the tunnel they had heard a noise - a scream of pain. Now they were at the junction and knew that one way would bring them to their brother and two others would lead them farther away, perhaps to the point that they would be unable to reach Mike in time. Leonardo looked down one way and then another, finally turning towards the last tunnel and gripping his swords tightly.

"I don't know."

"Should we split up?" Don asked.

Leo's face flew back up and he looked the other in the eye. "No! I'm not going to risk us getting picked off one by one."

Raph pushed into Leonardo's view. "Then what do you propose we do?" he asked angrily. "We can't..." he stopped and looked up the tunnel to the left, taking a step. "This way," he told them.

Don looked at Leo, who nodded and began to follow. Perhaps Raph's instincts would lead them to Mike as it had warned them of the creature's presence in the first place. Leo hoped his faith in Raphael's animalism was not misplaced. He discovered with glaring horror that it was not when the still form of their brother came into view, lying face-down in the thick water.

Raphael fell to Michaelangelo's side and rolled him onto his shell, patting him on a lacerated cheek and trying to revive him. Leo and Don stared down the darkened tunnel, looking for the creature.

"Its not here!" Raph yelled. "It left! Now get over here, Mike isn't breathing!"

Don kneeled and tilted Mike forward, picking him up into his arms and carrying him to the ledge, where he laid him down as gently as he could. He pressed a finger to his throat and waited, holding his breath as he felt for a pulse. There was a heartbeat - slow and unsteady but there. Donatello rolled his brother onto his side and let the water run from his mouth then shifted him back to his shell and cupped his hands over Mike's mouth. He left a gap between his fingers and breathed into it, forcing air into the motionless ninja's lungs. He took a breath and did it again, blowing harder.

Leo and Raph stood by, watching and praying, unable to do much else to aid in their brother's rescue. Don looked up at them as he went down for another breath.

"C'mon, kid," he whispered before pressing his mouth to the gap. He came up for another breath and yelled, "Breathe, dammit!"

Almost obediently, Mike coughed and muddy water poured from his mouth as Don rolled him to his side. The turtles were all half-smiling and on the verge of tears, still praying that he would be okay, wondering what the creature had done to him. Mike was breathing on his own, but that was all. He still wasn't moving, his eyes still tightly closed and his mouth hanging open. His breaths were shallow and reluctant.

"Jesus," Don whispered, supporting his brother's head with one hand and touching the top of it with the other. "Look at this," he pointed at the three raising welts on Mike's forehead and the broken skin at the center. "That thing hit him real hard," he said. "Hard enough to do this - it might have done some damage to his brain."

"What do you mean?" Raph demanded.

"Or fractured his skull," Don continued. "We have to get him back to the den right now!"

The others agreed without a word. Right now their priority was Michaelangelo, they didn't have time to go out looking for the thing that had nearly killed him. That mission would be completed in time, Leo only hoped that it would not play out as a vengeance run for a fallen brother.

Mark sat on the couch and stared at the huge rat that was staring back at him. It smiled slightly and stood, walking towards the boy with the aid of a wooden cane. He pushed himself deeper into the sofa's cushions and forced a faux smile.

"Tell me, child," Splinter said, sitting down beside him, "What brought you and your friends into the sewer this evening?"

Mark slid as far away from the rat as he could, mashing his hip against the sofa's arm. "I... uh, we..." he swallowed and pursed his lips together.

Splinter put a furry hand on the teen's own and tilted his head. "Do I frighten you?"

"Yes," he replied, being sure not to pull his hand away for fear of the reaction the rat would take to such a movement. "I am."

"I understand," the ninja master said. "There were times, at the beginning, when I was frightened by myself. By my reflection in the mirror."

"You mean... you weren't always like this?"

"No. I used to be a man, a human."

Mark relaxed his posture. "What happened?"

Splinter sighed and folded his hands on his lap. "Many, many things..." he said. "And the story of our origin is best left for another time."

"The, uh... the turtle guys, were they people, too?"

"They **are** people. However, they were never human."

"Oh..."

"If you do not wish to tell me what caused you to be down here in the sewers I will not ask again. I fear human curiosity is still great within me, even after all these years."

"No... it's okay. I mean, I should tell you. It's kinda' like we were barging in on your place and all."

"Only if you are comfortable with the telling," Splinter told him softly.

Mark looked at his hands. "Ronnie and Neal, they're in a club. I wanted to be in, so they told me to come down and, you know... get something. A box. But there wasn't a box, it was a trick, a joke - a good one, really. They scared the hell out of me."

Splinter nodded. "And Neal escaped?"

"I hope so," Mark said, letting out a breath.

The sound of the door being thrown open attracted their attention and they looked up, both jumping to their feet when they saw three turtles walking in, and another being cradled in Raphael's arms.

"Michaelangelo?" Splinter said, running to his sons without the support of his cane.

Raph continued walking, bringing his unconscious brother into the lab and laying him down on the examination bed. He reached onto a

nearby tray and picked up a scalpel, cutting through the orange fabric of Mike's mask and pulling it off.

"He was attacked," Don said, unfastening his brother's belt. He pointed at a nearby medicine chest. "Leo, get out the alcohol and hydrogen peroxide. Gauze, tape..."

Leonardo pulled the chest off the wall and brought it to Mike's bedside. "Here," he said.

Donatello cleared his throat. "Good idea."

As Raph and Don went to work on Mike, Leo stepped out of the way, joining his master and their human guest at the far side of the room. Splinter had a concerned look on his face, reflected slightly diluted on Mark's own. Leonardo put a hand on Splinter's shoulder and guided him into a chair, which the human teen leaned against from behind.

"We found the creature," Leo said. "It found us."

"What was it?" Mark asked, gripping the back of Splinter's kimono.

"We don't know. It was... quiet, dark. Master, we didn't hear it, we could barely see it, it didn't even have a smell. What kind of beast could this be?"

"I do not know, my son," the rat admitted.

Leo sighed. "The only one who could even tell when it was near was Raph, and he just kind of *felt* it. He just knew when it was near."

Mark suddenly realized how tightly he was holding to Splinter's garment and let it loose. "What about Ronnie?"

Leo looked down and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

The teen crumpled to the floor, folding his legs and holding onto his head as he rocked back and forth. Splinter turned and put a hand on

the back of his head, patting gently and trying to calm the boy. Mark did calm and looked up, tears rolling from his eyes.

"Can I please go home..?"

Leo took a deep breath. "I'm afraid not. None of us are going to leave the den tonight, that thing is too close by. In the morning we'll take you to the surface, but we will need your solemn word not to mention what you know of us and our home."

"You have my word," Mark sobbed. "What... I mean, how is he doing? Is he going to be okay?" he pointed towards Mike as the two ninjas tended his wounds.

"We don't know yet. Don't worry, Don is good. Really. He'll do the best he can."

Mark looked into Leo's frightened eyes. "He's your brother, right?"

Leo nodded.

"I'm sorry I... if I hadn't run into you guys in the first place this wouldn't have happened. I mean, Ronnie was a friend, but nowhere near... he wasn't my brother. He's dead... Jesus... he's dead. 'Cause of me... and now Mike might die because of me..."

"Don't let yourself believe that," Leo said. "This thing was close to our home to begin with, if you hadn't come by we might not have known until later, maybe not at all - until it came upon us in the dead of night. Now we know its there and we can arm ourselves against it, prepare for it."

"But..."

"No. Don't let yourself say that word. Not now, not in this instance. I also don't believe that you were responsible for your friend's death, so don't drag yourself down into that pit of guilt. There is only one

guilty party, and right now it is out there and we are in here - safe, protected."

Mark closed his eyes. "I don't feel so safe," he said.

Neither do I , Leonardo thought.

"Leo, come over here," Don called out.

"What is it?" Leonardo joined the others at the bed and looked down at Michaelangelo, who was in a deeper state than sleep. "Is he going to be okay?"

"I think so," Don said. "It doesn't seem like his skull was fractured, but I really can't tell without better equipment. There's still the possibility of a brain hemorrhage or..." he let his voice fade. "All we can really do right now is hope he makes it through till tomorrow. That'll be half the fight."

Leo touched the large white bandage on the unconscious turtle's arm. "What happened here?"

Don and Raph shared a look and the former pulled back the tape, revealing two rows of teeth marks. The teeth had broken the skin and they seemed to have been both large and sharp, though not pointed. Like flat razorblades lined up one after another along the gums of the creature's large mouth.

"I'm not going to ask, because I know you don't know..." Leo said.

"If you mean what caused this, you're right," Don said, taping the gauze back down. "I mean, we know it was the creature, but that still doesn't clear anything up. Whatever kind of animal this was, it wasn't anything I'm familiar with. Then there's this," he pointed at the two slash marks on Mike's cheek. "Definitely claws, definitely sharp. Other than that I haven't got a clue."

Leo nodded and looked at Raphael. "Do you need Raph right now?" he asked Donatello.

"No, I think I can handle it from here."

"Okay, but I'm gonna' send the kid over," Leo told him. "Keep him busy, keep him calm. Maybe helping will rest his nerves, anyway."

"Okay. No problem."

Leo motioned with his head for Raph to walk with him to Splinter, an order which was followed grudgingly.

"Mark, would you go over and help Don out for a few minutes?" Leonardo asked the human. "I need to talk to Master Splinter and Raphael alone."

Mark nodded and stepped away, joining the studious turtle at Mike's side. Leonardo watched him for a few seconds, then turned back to the others.

"Raph, will you tell Sensei what you felt?"

"Felt?" Raph asked, a little confused. "Oh. Well, there isn't much to tell. I mean, I just kinda' sensed the thing, you know?"

"Go on," Splinter said.

Raph's face turned somber as he thought back. "I was alone in the tunnel," he said slowly, retracing each detail in his mind. "It was like something touched me in the center of my head, like... ugh! I don't know how to explain it!"

"Then do not explain it," Splinter said. "Just feel it. Feel it again, as you did at the time."

Raph calmed himself and closed his eyes, imagining he was back in the tunnel, alone and crouching, waiting for a sign.

"It's dark," he said. "I can't hear anything. There's no breathing, no sloshing water, no..." he stopped. "Wait... there is something. But I don't hear it... it... it's like an emotion. Like a part of myself whispering that something is there. I've felt it before, it's like when you're alone in a room and you swear there is someone there with you, or you just know someone is looking at you..."

"Like an instinct?" Leo asked.

"Exactly," Raphael opened his eyes. "Like a force, a mental signal."

Splinter nodded. "You have always been more connected with your animal instincts than have your brothers," he said. "It is possible that this creature is much more animal in nature than any of you had considered."

"But Mark said it spoke," Leo said. "Doesn't that indicate intelligence?"

"A parrot may speak, may repeat words that it has heard," Splinter said. "Apes use tools, as the weapon the creature used against Mark's friend. Because an animal can do these things, it does not necessarily follow that it is sentient."

"I understand that, Master, but this thing - its actions seemed more than just instincts, like it was planning the attack."

"Animals also do that," Raph said. "Wolves, lions... all sorts of things."

Leo looked at him and folded his arms. "And how would you know?"

"Like Splinter said about me being closer to my animal side than the rest of you. Especially **you** , Leo. You're about as tame as they get."

"So," Leonardo said, turning back to their master. "How do you suggest we handle this threat, Sensei?"

"Without more information it is difficult to divine a solution," the rat said. "However, the safest course may be to remain together this evening. None of us will leave the other's sight"

"Seems a little defeatist to me," Raph said, immediately regretting the choice of words. "I mean no disrespect, Master... but shouldn't we go out looking for this thing? It almost killed Mikey, for God's sake."

"We will remain together," Splinter repeated. "Mark is an innocent, Michaelangelo is incapable of helping you or himself - these two alone are handicaps in this battle you plan so hastily, my son."

"And self-preservation is the first law of nature," Leo said. "It won't come at us if it thinks it'll lose."

"What makes you think it will come near the den at all?" Raphael asked.

Leo looked back at Michaelangelo and the two that were tending him. "Same thing that led it to us in the first place. Remember, you were the one that noticed it in the sewer - on Mike."

"Blood. The smell of blood," Raph said, looking down at the drying red fluid on his arms. "We should all wash up."

"That will not remove the threat," Splinter said. "But it may diminish it."

"Let's send the kid to the showers first, he's got the most on him," Raph said and waited for a response from the rat.

Splinter nodded and Raph turned on his heel, walking to the teen who stood by Mike's bed, staring down at his expressionless face. Mark was feeling definite guilt, almost as much as Raph was for letting the thing get its ugly clawed hands on his brother. He doubled his fist and released it, trying to ease back his mind, relieved, at least, that Mike was alive and breathing.

"Mark?"

The boy's face shot up and looked at the turtle. "Yeah?

"You should take a shower, wash off that blood."

Mark looked down at himself and the blood spattered across his shirt and arms. "Yeah... I guess so."

"C'mon, it's this way," Raph led him out of the lab, to a door off the living room that led to the bathroom. "There's soap and towels and stuff," he said, pointing in. "I'll keep an eye on the door, if you need anything just yell."

The human sighed and nodded, walking in and shutting the door. Raph pulled up a wooden chair and sat down, leaning back far enough against the wall so the chair's front legs lifted and his own legs dangled in the air, his toes ten centimeters off the floor. He heard the shower sputter to life and the curtain being drawn aside, then slid back into position. Raph felt bad for the kid; he'd seen his friend murdered right in front of him and now he felt responsible for what had happened to Mikey. But he wasn't responsible - Splinter was right, this thing was an animal. That was the only true answer, the only possible explanation for why it reacted the way it had. They had invaded its territory and it was not going to sit around and wait for them to return and do it again. Most likely it would follow the scent back to the den - perhaps it already had, perhaps it was stalking outside their door at that moment, waiting for a chance to get in...

Donatello scratched the back of his neck and looked over at Mikey as he slept. Raph was sleeping now, too, with his head on the foot of his injured brother's bed. On a mattress on the floor Splinter and the human teen tossed and turned, lost in their own dreams of the events of the evening past. Leo and Don alone were awake, on joint watch so that neither would be taken by surprise by the creature should it decide to invade their home. At least they had all gotten

their showers and were able to wash away most of the smell of blood. Not that it would matter - if the thing truly wanted to find them it **would** .

Don doubted that the double watch would mean much, considering the ease in which the thing had first attacked them. In his logical mind he still couldn't place it, couldn't understand why they had fallen prey so easily. Leonardo had explained to him what Splinter said about the thing being an animal and acting as such, but that didn't explain their own lacking. Regardless as to how quiet an animal might be, there are always indications of its presence. A scent, a footprint, a fleeting image in the peripheral vision. But there was nothing that told them when this thing came near - nothing, save Raphael's nascent sixth sense that at this moment was sleeping with him at Michaelangelo's bedside.

Leonardo walked in the door to the infirmary and slid his sword into its sheath, stretching and yawning as he got to Don's side.

"Still quiet out there," he said, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Don stretched out his own legs and leaned back against the wall. "Nothing in here, either."

"Didn't figure there'd be."

They shifted into silence and stared pointlessly towards the door as the dim light of an oil lamp flickered, casting alternating shadows on the people and objects in the room. It gave the space an eerie sense that was not lost to either of the turtles, but which each tried to ignore with vehement resolution. This was not a time to be frightened of shadows, it was a time to be strong against the very real danger that lurked so close to their home and family. Donatello stood and walked to the lamp, turning the knob that gave it more oil. The flame grew and the flickers subsided, the new illumination reaching past the open door, into the living room beyond.

"I'm gonna' go check the front door," Don said, turning and making his way out of the room. "Keep an ear out for me."

Leonardo redrew his sword and laid it across his legs, placing a palm on the blade and another wrapped tightly around the handle. "Don't be too long," he said, trying to make it sound like a request rather than an order.

Don nodded without turning back and grabbed his bo from its resting place by the wall before stepping full out of the infirmary. Leonardo straightened his posture and looked at the sleeping people around him. They were trusting him and Don to keep them safe while they rested, they were running on faith in the midst of a nightmare.

His eyes flew to the floor as a rat scurried past. He held out his hand to it and clicked with his tongue, rubbing his fingers together and attracting it to him. He knew this rat, it was something of a family pet. Once in a while it would slide out of its hiding place to seek out leftovers or just to let the turtles know that it was still there - Mike had named it Rosco, for reasons known only to him.

Rosco stopped and sniffed the air before turning and pattering to Leo's fingers. It licked them and he picked it up, patting it between the ears and smiling as it diligently cleaned its front paws. Suddenly the rat stopped and sat full upright upon its back paws, its whiskers twitching as it found a new scent. Rosco's ears rotated forward and he let out a little squeak, then jumped out of the turtle's hands and ran to a large chest on the other side of the room, hiding beneath it. Leo watched him go and wrapped his hand around the handle of his sword again, gripping it even tighter.

He heard a mumble and looked up at Raphael, who's head was rolling back and forth, his thoughts evident through his dreams to the physical world.

"... *Neikan* ," Raph whispered, his fingers curling to a fist beneath his face.

Leonardo stood and walked to Raph, putting a hand on the back of his shell. The sleeping turtle calmed and Leo turned his attentions to the living room. *Don shouldn't be taking so long checking the door,* he thought, walking out of the infirmary.

"Donny?" he called out softly.

He heard no reply, but looked instinctively towards the front door. Past the darkness he could see his brother standing there, his bo gripped tightly in his hand and held out to his right, his shell towards Leo as he looked out the door into the sewer beyond. He wasn't moving, perhaps he had seen something. He rested the bo against the wall and motioned to the other ninja without turning around. Leonardo stepped up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

Don turned, there was a red streak down the center of his face, between his eyes. Leo's mouth fell open and he reached up, touching the blood.

"What happened?" he asked, concerned. "Did it come here? Is it out there?"

Don looked back out the door. "I don't know... don't worry, it isn't my blood."

"Then what..?"

"I thought I heard something outside and I opened the door," he pointed at the floor and another dead rat that lay there. "It was propped up over the door, fell on my head."

Leo gritted his teeth as he backed a step away from the door and put a hand on Don's elbow, pulling him. He heard a noise and shifted back around, looking towards his brothers face. Don's eyes were wide and his mouth open, a choking came from somewhere in his throat and Leo felt a shiver travel up his own body.

"Donny?"

Suddenly Donatello was wrenched out of Leo's view, pulled into the sewer beyond the den. Leonardo bounded forward, jumping through the door after his brother; he found him being held up by his throat by the creature, which still confined itself to the darkest corner of the wall. Don's feet were kicking the air while his fingers fought fruitlessly to free the grip that was blocking out his air. Leo jumped ahead, his sword aimed at the shadowed thing's chest. He swung and contacted with nothing, though there was no way for it to have moved away so quickly.

The turtle looked behind him in time to see a hand, clawed and covered with blood, as it came at his face. He dodged and ducked, rolling out past the thing's reach. The roll was not far enough, however, and the creature kicked him squarely in the plastron. Leo flew back, his sword flying from his grip; he hit the wall with his shell and fell forward, landing on his hands and knees. He looked around him, his sword was too far away to reach in time - but he still had another strapped to his back. He reached his arm up and felt a sharp pain travel up his spine - an aftereffect from the impact with the wall.

The pain kept him from following through and he saw the foot coming at him again, this time aimed at his face. He tried to move from its way, but managed only to bring himself out of its direct path, not entirely away from the threat. The muddy foot hit him on the side of the head and he spun, landing on his carapace and sending an even sharper pain up his back. He looked over at Donatello, who had stopped resisting and was now hanging limp in the creature's grip. Leo tried to roll but felt a gust of air as it was displaced by the thing's leg being swung up for another kick. The foot came down again, impacting him in the face.

Leonardo turned his head weakly and watched as the thing dragged Donatello down the tunnel, away from the den. He opened his mouth and tried to yell to his brother but felt a strange lightening in his mind. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, feeling the sting in his back and ribs.

...Neikan... he thought, then thought nothing more.

Continued in Chapter Three

CH 3

Something Wicked

Chapter Three

Donatello gasped and sat up from his unconsciousness, grabbing his throat where the creature had been gripping him. He could breathe, at least - that was a good thing. He looked around him, unable to see past the darkness. For all he knew the thing could be right there, watching him as he searched for it. He crouched and felt the ground around him with his hand, searching for some sort of weapon. He stopped and looked up, sensing eyes upon him.

That was all he could see of the thing - its eyes. They were wide and white, pulled up at the sides as if the thing were smiling. A moment later it did smile, revealing two long rows of wide white teeth. Don stared at them, recalling the puncture marks on Mike's arm. The creature opened its mouth and snapped it shut again, moving closer in the shadows. Donatello's hand slid across the dirt again and he found with his touch a length of thick wire. Industrial wire, thick and sharp. He twisted the end into a loop and left the other end pointing towards the thing then stood and stepped forward.

The creature's eyes drew closer together as if pondering its prey's actions. It made a noise like a laugh and lowered itself, positioning for a pounce. Donatello prepared himself and tightened his grip on the wire. As was expected, the animal sprung forward, lashing its claws out at Don's face. He leaned back and swung out with the wire, missing his adversary. He spun around but the thing grabbed him by the wrist, folding the wire over and pressing the sharp end into the turtle's forearm. Don made a small sound of surprise.

The creature let out a pleased growl and pulled back on the wire, slicing through the ninja's green skin. It tightened its already unbreakable grip on his wrist and pushed him to the ground,

spinning him around onto his knees and pressing down on his twisted elbow with its foot. Don gritted his teeth and fought back the sudden wave of pain that traveled through his arm and shoulder. It twisted him again and slammed him onto his shell, stepping down hard on his plastron. It pushed down, to the point where Don was certain the plates that protected his chest would crack.

The creature let up and Donatello took a deep breath. The relief lasted only moments and the thing dug its claws deep into his arm, slicing through the skin again. It bent over and smelled the blood as it flowed from Don's fresh wound. The turtle reached up, trying to dig his fingers into the only visible vulnerable spot the creature had - its eyes. It grabbed his hand and squeezed, bending over and licking the blood from his arm.

"......Taste..." it whispered. It shook its head and blood flew from its mouth onto Don's face. It laughed again. "......Fun.... animal people..... fun..... keep animal people....."

It brought its face down again and dug its teeth into the flesh on Donatello's already lacerated arm. He let out a yell of pain as it pulled away, taking skin from off the muscle. It bounced off into the shadows and watched him as he scrambled to his knees, cradling his flayed limb. It wanted to keep him around, he realized with horror. It thought he was fun... a mouse for the cat to play with until it got hungry enough to eat...

Mike breathed a little deeper, his eyelids fluttering and his fingers gripping weakly to the sheet that lay beneath him. His eyes flew open as he sat up in bed, looking all around him for a sign of the creature that had been brutally slamming him against the sewer wall just moments before. But it hadn't been moments, it had been hours - he was home, in the infirmary with bandages on his head and arm. He was alive - he didn't expect to be alive. He looked towards the end of the bed and saw Raphael sitting in a chair, his head rested forward on his arms, which were folded across the white fabric.

"Raph?" Mike said, surprising himself by how rough his own voice sounded. He nudged the sleeping turtle with his foot and repeated, "Raph?"

Raphael snorted and his head shot up, looking around him. He finally looked up at Mike and jumped to his feet, running to the head of the bed and wrapping his arms around his suddenly-awake brother.

"Mikey! Oh, Jeez... man, are you okay?"

"...Uh, yeah..." Mike put a hand on his head and his eyes slid to the bandage on his arm. "Damn thing bit me..."

Raph forced himself to smile. "Yeah... we saw that."

Across the room, Splinter sat up on the mattress and stretched, opening his wide mouth in a yawn that hid the rest of his face. He closed his mouth and shook his head, chasing out the last remaining fragments of sleep before standing and walking to Michaelangelo's side. He smiled a gentle smile and put a hand on his son's arm, saying with a touch that he was happy that the turtle was awake and well, at least for the most part.

"Master?" Mike said, his voice still harsh despite his efforts to make it soft. "What happened?"

"Do you not remember?"

"I remember some of it," he said, looking down at his hands. "I remember it bit me and I remember hearing the guys..."

"Anything else?" Raph asked, squeezing Mike's hand. "Do you remember what the thing looked like?"

Michaelangelo shook his head. "No, just that it was freakin ugly..." he looked over at Mark, who still slept on the mattress. "How's the kid doing?"

"Good as can be expected," Raph said.

Mike looked around the room again and then into Raphael's eyes. "Where are Leo and Don?"

"They had first watch, they're probably checking out the rest of the den," Raphael told him. "Me and Splinter are supposed to relieve them at three AM."

"What time is it?"

Raphael walked to the center of the room and reached up, grabbing the dangling cord that led to the naked light fixture. The room was bathed in a new illumination and everyone blinked, trying to adjust their sight. Mark sat up suddenly and pushed himself off the mattress, landing on the floor gracelessly. He stood and rubbed his eyes, jumping aside when Rosco scurried back under the chest.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Hi, Mark," Mike said, waving with his uninjured arm.

"Mike?" the human walked to his side and smiled. "Wow... so you're okay, huh?"

"In one piece," the ninja said, looking down at himself. "I think."

Raphael looked up at the clock on the wall and his own expression flattened. "Damn..." he said. "Uh, guys... it's quarter-to-four."

Splinter spun to look at the time and then down at his son. He didn't have to tell Raphael what to do as they both headed towards the door to the living room without a word. Mark put a hand on Mike's arm and looked him in the eye.

"What's going on?" the teen asked.

Michaelangelo made a fist and swung his feet off the side of the bed. "Trouble," he said, trying to stand.

He wobbled on uncertain legs and Mark reached out, giving him support. They looked at one another and Mike sat back down. Whatever was happening, he would be unable to help.

Splinter was first to notice that the door to the sewers hung open. He signaled to Raphael, who drew his sai and stepped forward silently. The turtle pressed himself to the wall and peered out the door, looking beyond the darkness for a sign of either his brothers or the creature. He looked down at the ground and saw a spot of blood on the dirt. Raph let out a low growl and stepped out of the den, into the tunnel.

He looked down the way and his eyes fell upon a still form lying on the dirty concrete. He ran ahead and kneeled down beside Leonardo, shaking him roughly. Leo let out a small noise and opened his eyes, looking up at his worried brother.

"...Don..." Leonardo whispered.

"Where is he?" Raph asked.

Leo's eyes closed again and Raphael pushed him up to sitting.

"Leo," Raph said loudly. "Leo, where's Don?"

Leonardo grunted and his head rolled to the side, though his eyes finally opened full. "It got him," he said, trying to regain his lucidity. "Neikan got him."

Splinter walked up to his sons and helped Leo to stand. "Come, we must get him inside at once."

Raphael wrapped one of his brother's arms over his shoulder and guided him into the den. "Master, what did he say? What's *Neikan* ?"

"You do not know?" Splinter said, latching the door as Raphael laid the other ninja down on the sofa. "Have you forgotten all the language lessons I have given you?"

Raph kneeled down, examining Leonardo's head. "Uh... wait. I think... it means *bad* , right?"

"It means *wicked* ," Splinter said. "Though the usage is not correct..."

"Hold on!" Raph said, spinning. "I was dreaming last night... I remember something happened in my dream and I called the thing *Neikan* ..."

"Indeed... perhaps you were talking in your sleep, as well."

"Either that or something serious weird is going on between me and Leo's brain..."

Leonardo struggled to sit up and looked at his brother. "No..." he said weakly. "I heard you. You said it."

"Lay back, you're in no shape to move right now."

"No... we have to go find Donny... that damn thing got him, it took him..."

"I said **sit back** ," Raphael said, his voice authoritative. "I'll go out and find Donny, I'm sure he's okay... he can take care of himself."

Even as Raphael said it, he didn't believe it. That thing - Neikan was vicious. How many hours had gone by since Don had been taken? Maybe too many - too long. When they had found Mikey it had been without a moment to spare, and now...

"I'm going out to look for him," Raph said, standing and making way for the door.

"Wait!" Michaelangelo's voice called out from the doorway to the infirmary.

Raph turned to see the other turtle being supported by Mark, walking ahead unsteadily. He sat down on the arm of the sofa.

"Mike!" Leonardo yelled, hugging his brother. "Oh, geez... are you okay?"

"I'm okay... I have a frickin headache, but I'm in one piece. Now, what happened? Where's Donny?"

Leo put his feet on the floor and fought back a noise of pain as a sting traveled up his back.

"He was checking the door," he said. "And it... it just pulled him out. I tried to cut it but it was like my katana went right through."

"Damn..." Mike rubbed a growing throb at the front of his head. "Y'know... I think..."

"What?" Raphael pressed, walking back to the sofa.

Mike jumped to his feet and wobbled, swaying back and forth. Raph put a hand under his elbow and guided him onto an empty cushion. He took a deep breath and looked up at their master.

"Sensei... the thing..."

"Neikan," Leo said.

"Neikan? It... it was like us. It was a turtle."

They all shared a shock that was untranslatable into words. They stared at Mike, every mouth open in near disbelief.

"Slash?" Raphael asked.

Michaelangelo shook his head. "No... not Slash. Someone... something else."

"Besides," Leo spoke up. "Slash is dead. Either way, this isn't something he'd do."

Splinter was staring off at the far side of the room, looking at nothing, but lost in his own thoughts.

"Master?" Mike said.

The rat looked him in the eye and drew in a deep breath. "I am afraid I may have a disturbing answer," he said.

"Sorry, Master," Raphael said, running for the door. "It'll have to wait. I'm going to look for Don."

"Raph, wait!" Leo stood and ran after him, ignoring the pain in his back. "I'm coming, too."

"Get your ass back on the couch, I can handle this alone."

"No, you can't. You haven't actually gone up against this thing, I have. It isn't **normal** , it'll take more than one of us to take it down."

"He's right," Mike struggled to his feet and took a step, finding himself held back by Mark's grip on his arm. "You can't go this alone."

"I almost lost you, Mike," Raph said, his hand resting on the doorknob. "I am not going to loose Donny, too."

"Listen to yourself," Leo said, putting his hands on Raph's shoulders. "This is Donny we're talking about. He's **our** brother, too. We aren't going to abandon him any more than you are. I'm going."

"Leo..."

"Shut up."

Raphael closed his mouth and looked off to the side, conceding.

"Mike, I'm sorry, but you need to stay here," Leo said.

"But..."

"You got it a lot worse than I did, I'm not going to have you out running around in your condition."

Michaelangelo looked to Splinter. The expression on the mammal's face read disapproval for his sons' determination to head blindly out after the creature, but also showed that he agreed with Leonardo's recommendation that the more injured turtle stay behind. Mike nodded and sat back down, rubbing his palms together and looking past them at Leo and Raph.

"Be careful," he said. "Please."

Leonardo nodded and looked towards Splinter, bowing respectfully. Raphael did likewise and the two turtles walked out the door.

"This is yours," Raph said, bending over when they were full into the tunnel.

He held up a sword and flipped it into the air, towards Leonardo. The turtle caught it expertly by the handle and slid it into its sheath without losing any fluidity in the movement. He cracked his knuckles and looked over at Raphael, who's arms were folded tightly across his plastron. Leo shifted his eyes to the ground and looked at a red splotch on the dirt.

"Its gone," he said.

Raphael looked to the ground where Leo's eyes were focused. "What?"

"A rat. There was a dead rat," he pointed. "Right there."

Raphael looked in his brother's face. "Did it take it?"

"No... it took Donny. It left the rat behind."

Raphael unfolded his arms and balled his fists. "Then it must have come back."

"While I was out of it," Leo added.

"But it didn't take you. Why?"

"I wish I knew."

"What's more, it didn't come into the den," Raph said. "We were all asleep, we'd have been easy pickin's."

Leonardo redrew his sword and looked at the blade. It was shiny, no trace of blood. "I know that I came close enough to hit it. I must have. There's no way I could have missed at such close quarters."

"Mysteries upon mysteries," Raphael said. "Right now all I want is to get our brother back. Alive. We'll worry about the rest of this crap later."

Leonardo nodded. "Lets go find Donny."

"And rip up Neikan," Raph added as they began to walk swiftly down the tunnel.

Donatello sat in the darkness, leaning back against something hard and uneven. He didn't know what it was and he didn't care, all that meant anything at that moment was that the thing had gone away. But it wouldn't be gone for long, it would return. That's what it did, it toyed with him, it bounded him off the walls for a few minutes... then it would perch itself upon his plastron and look down at him with those awful white eyes and stare, its mouth dripping blood that came from Don's own injuries.

He felt his arm and the slick, exposed muscle that had once been protected by his skin. That skin had been sheared away, torn by the creatures claws then ripped off the muscle with its razor sharp teeth. All the while, through the torture and the pain Donatello had been unable to fight back, every punch he threw was dodged, every object he wielded was ripped from his grip and turned back on him. He

touched the head of a long nail that protruded from his leg and winced. He hadn't remembered that one. Past the pain he could feel nothing specific any more, for all he knew he could have a knife sticking out from the plates on his plastron and he would not be able to differentiate between that and the nail. With so much pain, there was none he could separate.

He let his hand slip to the floor, ignoring the metal sunk into his flesh. What would it matter if he took it out now? He was bleeding anyway, dying a little more by the moment. He laid his head back and let a tear fall down his cheek. Soon the thing would be back, it would start all over again... snarling, sneering - white teeth and eyes the only thing visible in the darkness. It would slide at him noiselessly and launch again upon its prey, sinking its teeth into any unmarred spot left on the turtle's body... there weren't many of those spots left. It was systematically tearing him apart, centimeter by centimeter, ripping away skin and tearing into muscle. Then it would leave him alive, refusing to end the macabre game.

But he wouldn't let the game go on. This time, when it came back, he would fight. He had fought against it before, many times over the past few hours - but this time he would see to it that either the thing died or he did. He would not let it use him any more, he would not be a toy. One blood or another, one life or another. And if he lost, if the thing succeeded in bringing him down again and keeping him alive he would still see to it that only one life remained. His own life would be forfeit - he would die at his own hand. With honor.

He didn't hear it coming, he didn't have to. He was feeling what Raphael had felt, the pull at the back of his mind, the silent announcement. A chill traveled up his spine and he struggled to his feet, pulling the long nail out of his leg. It didn't hurt - no more, at least, than anything else hurt at the moment. He gritted his teeth and stared into the darkness, gripping the nail and balling his fist. Two white eyes came into view, shifting up and down with each step the creature took. Donatello let himself toss aside his thoughts and logic, this was an animal he was fighting. It didn't understand logic or

negotiation, it understood survival - and as such, Don would let his own instincts to the fore.

Fire with fire, he thought. *Forgive me, Master... I know this is not what you taught me... I know you hoped I would die fighting as you had trained me... but now I can't. I love you, Master...*

Donatello screamed out and dove into the darkness, slashing the nail at his adversary's head. The creature dodged and Don landed on his feet, spinning around and baring his own teeth as he slashed again at the thing. It grabbed him by the wrist and hit him in the face with a clawed hand, then throwing him to the dirty ground. Don rolled to his knees and felt the nail still tightly in his grip. Blood trickled down his cheek to the corner of his mouth and he licked it away, growling. It tasted metallic - he liked it. As a logical being he rejected such things - but as an animal, it drove him on.

He leaped onto the creature as it grew near, grabbing its head and swinging behind its back, pulling it down to the ground. It growled and the ninja let out another scream, thrusting out with the nail. This time it made contact, hitting some part of the creature's skin. He slammed his fist against the nail, driving it in deeper. The thing let out a yell of pain and pushed the turtle off it, slamming him against a wall.

Don fell to the ground and landed on his hands and knees. Beneath his palm he felt something flat and cold, his fingers slid along the edge. It was sharp. Perfect. He picked up the jagged metal and squeezed it, cutting into his own palm. That didn't matter, he needed a good grip. In the shadows the creature was struggling, trying in vain to remove the nail from its flesh. Don took advantage of its distraction and launched forward, aiming the metal for the spot between the creature's eyes. It looked up as he came near and squealed, jumping back. The movement did not deter Don's attack and he shifted his aim for a place below the eyes - far enough below the eyes that it would be the thing's throat.

The metal sunk in and Donatello pushed against it, listening to the rip of flesh. Blood spurted onto the ninja's face, past his lips and gritted teeth. It didn't taste like blood - it didn't taste like anything. Like everything else about this creature - its scent, its noise, its breath - the blood was blank. That did not make Don want it to bleed any less. He pulled the metal out and slashed at the thing's face, hitting it flat at the center of its forehead. It fell back and scrambled away, into an even darker corner. Donatello bounded after it, licking the tasteless blood from off his lips.

He stopped, starting to shake. He opened his hand and the metal stayed embedded in the skin of his palm, he reached up with the other hand and pulled it out, wincing. That was enough of the fight. He had won - even if the creature was not yet dead it would be soon. It would bleed to death there in that corner, its life flowing from the hole he had slashed into its throat. He didn't smile at the victory - it was no true victory to speak of. He had been vicious - as vicious as the creature itself.

He fell to his knees and leaned forward, spitting out a mouthful of blood - his own and the creature's. In the darkness the thing stared at him, blinking. The only sign that the thing was still alive - the only sign that it was even still there. Don stood up and backed away, one step then another, working his way from the creature's view. At long last he turned and limped forward, away from the evil that lay bleeding in the shadows. Should it choose to attack him now it would be fair play. He had killed it, it would be right for it to try and take him out as well.

He still couldn't believe the brutality that he had shown, the animalism that he had been unable to keep hidden within. He wondered what Splinter would say, how he would react to his son's lack of control.

I failed you, Master... he thought. *I'm sorry.*

He walked on and on, regretting his actions and half- wishing that the thing would come upon him and dig its claws into his throat, to

even the score. Behind him the trail of his blood grew wider as more flowed from his varied and prolific wounds. It was all beginning to hurt again as the adrenaline wore off. More, he was getting tired, cold... his head was beginning to swim. He stopped and rested his shell against the sewer wall and started to lower himself to the ground. Halfway down he stopped and his balance failed him, sending him tumbling to his side, his face hit the dirt and it flew up into his eyes. He squeezed them shut, forcing out tears to wash away the grime. Somewhere far away he could hear voices. No, not so far away - near. Very near.

"Then it must have come back."

"While I was out of it."

"But it didn't take you. Why?"

"I wish I knew."

"What's more, it didn't come into the den. We were all asleep, we'd have been easy pickin's."

"I know that I came close enough to hit it. I must have. There's no way I could have missed at such close quarters."

"Mysteries upon mysteries. Right now all I want is to get our brother back. Alive. We'll worry about the rest of this crap later."

"Lets go find Donny."

"And rip up Neikan."

Donatello opened his mouth to yell out but no words emerged. They were close - so close. He felt his head grow lighter and rolled onto his plastron, pulling himself along the ground to where the voices had come from. He stopped and rested his head on the ground, taking a deep breath and filling his mouth with up blown dirt. That would be as far as he'd be able to get. But they were near... he

wouldn't have to get to them, they would find him. They had to... he was right there...

"Hold on... did you hear something?" Raphael stopped and looked behind them at the tunnel.

"What?" Leo asked.

"I don't know... something..." he looked Leonardo in the eye. "You trust me, right?"

Leo hesitated for a moment then replied, "Yes."

"Then come on," he turned and walked back down the tunnel, past the door to the den.

"Raph, Neikan took Don the other way... where are you going?"

"You said you trusted me, right?"

"Well..."

Raph stopped and held out an arm, stalling Leonardo in mid-step. "Hang on." He walked ahead noiselessly and his eyes grew wide. "Donny... oh, my god..."

Donatello was aware. He felt the arms of his brothers wrap around him and lift him up; he sensed the changing of direction when they rounded the corner, through the door into the den. He heard worried voices inquiring about his condition. He heard Mikey.

He's awake... Don thought. *Thank God...*

They laid him down on a bed - in the infirmary, most likely, and he felt something touch his raw muscle. He drew in a sharp breath with the pain.

"Hey... I think he's awake!" Leo called out. "Don..? Hey, Donny? Can you hear me?"

"Uhn.." the turtle moaned, rolling back and forth on the bed.

"Hold still," Raph said.

Donatello shot up to sitting and looked around him, regretting the action as soon as his head began to spin again. He tilted to the side and he felt several hands guiding him back to the mattress. He opened his eyes, still blurry from the dirt, and looked at his family as they gathered around him. He smiled.

"What happened," Mike asked. "How did you get away from it?"

"It..." Don's smile fell flat and he looked at the ceiling. "I killed it."

Raphael grinned and put his hand on his brother's cheek. "You did good..."

Don closed his eyes and let his body relax, drifting to sleep. Raph removed his hand and looked to his Master, then glanced to the side. Splinter put his hand on Raphael's shoulder.

"What is it, son?"

The turtle looked back at his sleeping brother and then took the other two by the arms, drawing them close to him.

"We have to talk," he said softly.

They nodded and walked to the other side of the room, Mike being aided by Leonardo into an empty chair. Raph sighed and shifted himself into Mark's view.

"Would you keep an eye on Donny for a minute?"

Mark nodded, pursing his lips as he looked down a the turtle's exposed muscle. "Yeah. Is he gonna' be okay?"

"Maybe," Raphael wasn't going to lie. "I hope so."

The turtle joined his brothers and their master at the far side of the room, looking into each face as it looked back at him with intense curiosity.

"He's wrong," he said at long last. "Neikan isn't dead."

"How do you know?" Mike asked.

"Because I can still feel it. Its almost like the damn thing is right here in the room with us."

Leo and Mike looked around them instinctively and Splinter lowered his face.

"Let us tend to Donatello, then I shall attempt to explain," the rat said.

Leo swallowed hard and walked to the medicine chest while Raphael and Splinter returned to Don's side. Mike sat still, thinking over the situation. He turned to look at Leonardo when he heard the other swear softly.

"What?" Mike asked, standing and keeping his hand on the chair for support.

Leonardo stood aside and Mike looked in shock and disgust at a bloody mass lying on one of the shelves in the medicine chest. He limped forward and touched the slick red fur, his hand shaking.

"Rosco?" he said.

Leo tightened his jaw and closed the chest. "Lock the doors," he said. "Neikan is here."

Continued in Chapter Four

CH 4

Something Wicked

Chapter Four

While Raphael and Mike treated Donatello, Splinter and Leonardo set themselves up as guard. For the better part of an hour it had been quiet as each person had his mind set on the task before him. Even Mark had found a place for his attentions, running bandages and medical supplies for the turtles to use to treat their hurt brother. But there had been only so much running to do and finally he ended up just standing around, looking at each strange face as they tended their duties. The human's mind slid back to the sight of Ron lying stabbed in the deep sewer water; then his thoughts shifted to the person before him.

Mark shook his head and sat down on a wooden chair. When had he begun thinking of these creatures as people? He had only known them for less than a day - somehow that didn't seem to matter, they were watching out for him, protecting him. That was more than many humans he knew would be willing to do. Neal ran away, but Mark couldn't bring himself to blame him for that. In his place he would have probably done the same thing. But not these people - they weren't going to leave him. He watched as Leonardo stepped up to his brothers.

"How's Don?" Leo asked Mike and Raphael as they diligently treated the other turtle's wounds.

"He lost a lot of blood," Raphael replied. "But it seems that the bleeding has slowed itself down."

"Just call me if you need me," Leo said. "I'm going to check the room out one more time."

Leonardo walked around the infirmary, peeking through the door cracks and throwing open cabinets, searching for something that seemed to be able to go anywhere at any time, as it had done even after Donatello had believed it dead. Mark had told them how Rosco frightened him when he woke up, which meant that between the time Leo was discovered in the tunnel until they all went back into the infirmary with Donatello, Neikan had somehow gotten inside. Past observant eyes, with no shadows to slide through - the door to the infirmary in plain sight to the people in the living room at the time...

Leonardo felt a chill travel up his spine.

"You okay?"

Leo spun, drawing his sword, and looked at the surprised expression on Mark's face.

"Uh... sorry," the turtle said, lowering his katana. "Yeah, I'm good... a little jumpy, I guess."

The human put a hand on his chest as if checking to see if his own heart were still beating. "No kidding..."

Leo sat on the concrete floor and motioned for Mark to join him. "Are you frightened?"

Mark nodded, finding himself unable to lie to his new friend. "Yes."

Leonardo handed Mark his sword, which the boy took only after a few seconds of hesitation. It was lighter that it looked, almost graceful in its lines. Mark tightened his hand around the cord-wrapped handle and turned it over, looking at his own reflection in the metal. The katana seemed almost unreal, nearly alive - like an extension of the body. It passed its almost tangible energy into him, as if it were telling him that it would be there in his defense should the creature return. The teen smiled and passed the sword back to the ninja, who returned it to its sheath and grinned with his eyes. It made Mark feel a little less frightened to know that the katana would

be in Leonardo's hand should Neikan come to them - that this elegant, simple weapon would be wielded with skill by someone who knew how to use it.

Leo looked up at Don and his tenders then back to the human. "You probably don't believe this," he said. "But I'm frightened, too."

"You are?"

Leonardo leaned forward on his elbows and rested his chin on his folded hands. "I've... I have always been something of a leader. At least I try to be. I'm most like the oldest brother around here, the one that follows closest to Sensei's teachings and instructions. In some ways I think I see myself as almost a father to the guys sometimes."

"That must be weird."

"Not so much weird as stressful, you know? Do you have any younger brothers?"

"I have a sister," Mark looked at his palms. "She's eight."

"Then you might know what I'm saying."

"I think I do. I mean, I look out for her and all that."

"Has anything ever happened to her? That you felt bad about, I mean."

He nodded. "I guess... a few times. One time she got into the silverware drawer when I was babysitting her. She was five or six or something like that. She cut herself on a knife and she needed stitches. I got in trouble for it, too."

"I bet that getting in trouble didn't make you feel half as bad as you felt for letting it happen in the first place."

"It was my fault."

"Maybe, maybe not. That kind of thing happens when parents are around - even moms and dads can't keep kids out of trouble all the time. You couldn't keep your eyes pinned on her every second."

"No, but..."

"But you still felt responsible."

Mark looked into Leo's eyes. "So, that's what you feel like with them?"

"More so," Leonardo replied. "Life around here - in this family - it isn't easy. I mean, we have had to deal with things that most people in the topside world don't even know exist. So far we've always made it, always come through. With bumps, bruises, and broken bones... but always alive. We're playing bad odds now, you can only win so many times. I'm the *big brother* and I have a responsibility to them, even in situations that are beyond my control."

"I don't understand."

Leo hung his head. "I hope you never have to. Some people are afraid to let **anything** get out of their control."

"I guess you're one of those people."

Leo sighed. "Let's just try to forget that I said that out loud. Just remember this: while you are here you fall under our blanket of protection, we won't let anything happen to you so long as we are alive."

Mark picked up a piece of string and started twisting it between his fingers absentmindedly. "Why did you just tell me all that stuff? I mean, you don't seem to be the type that talks about that kind of thing."

Leonardo looked the teen in the eye. "I don't know... it just seemed right at the time."

"Hey, Leo!" Mike called from across the room.

Leonardo and Mark stood, walking to where the others gathered around Donatello's bed. The turtle's eyes were open and he was looking at each face that hovered above him.

"Donny," Leo said, biting his lip. "How do you feel?"

"Tore up," Don said weakly, looking at the bandage on his arm. "Raph said that I didn't kill the thing... but I remember doing it. I stabbed it in the throat... it couldn't have survived..."

Leonardo looked at Raphael.

"I had to tell him," Raph said.

"I know," Leo turned back to Donatello. "We have started calling it *Neikan* , but we still don't know what it is. Yes... it survived."

Don closed his eyes and rolled to his side; he began to cry. "Jesus... " he whispered. "I thought..."

Splinter put a hand on the back of his son's head. "I may have an answer," the rat said. "Although I do not believe it will be easily understood."

Leonardo took a deep breath. "We'll take anything at this point, Master."

Splinter nodded and sat on the floor, crossing his legs and folding his hands. The others, including Mark, joined him - sitting in a circle, silently waiting for him to begin. Donatello opened his eyes and looked at the assemblage from his position on the bed. He wiped away a final tear and nodded at Splinter. Satisfied that they were all ready to listen, the ninja master began to speak.

"At one point in my human youth I made a journey to Tibet," he began. "While there I studied for a time under the instruction of a lama."

"A what?" Mark asked, keeping his voice low. "Isn't that like a sheep or something?"

Raphael rolled his eyes and Mike leaned close to the human, nudging him on the arm. "No... that kind of llama has two *L's* - a *lama* is a Buddhist monk," he said.

"Oh..." Mark said, blushing.

Leonardo looked at Splinter. "It wasn't the Charlie Lama, was it, Master?" he asked, recalling the time that he and the others spent in Tibet.

"No," Splinter said. "And out of respect, I shall not tell you the name of who it was."

"Yes, master," Leo said, bowing his head.

The rat cleared his throat and continued. "While I was there I saw from time to time a young *trapa* - a novice monk. He would follow me or step aside to let me pass and smile as if he were a child. After a time I inquired of my tutor who the young one was. I was shocked to learn that the trapa that I had seen was not, in fact, alive."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, leaning forward.

"He... or rather, **it** was what is called a *tulpa* : a thought creature."

"Didn't I see that on *The X-Files* once?" Raph asked, unintentionally drawing looks of exasperation from those around him.

"My tutor explained to me how he had secluded himself for months," Splinter continued. "Performing the prescribed concentration of thought that would bring on such a creature. It had begun as a small sphere of ethereal energy that he shaped and formed over the course of his *tsams* into the form of the trapa. After the success my tutor broke his seclusion and was followed by the tulpa as he went about his daily tasks. At first the creature was visual only, and only to

him - however, over time others began seeing it and it seemed to take on a life and a spirit of its own. At times it even made physical contact with people in our camp.

"When I arrived and my tutor's attentions were shifted to my training, the tulpa became even more lifelike. It seemed to have fixated itself upon me since that is where its creator's own thoughts were focused. Throughout the course of my learning the spectral trapa followed me and seemed to learn as I did. After I left Tibet I remained in contact with my tutor for many years. He told me that the tulpa had become too independent of him and too much of a nuisance so he had finally decided to dissolve the phantom. It took him nine months of effort before it vanished completely."

"Are you saying I was fighting something that wasn't real?" Don said, struggling to sit. "Master... this thing was real... it tried to kill me... I stabbed it, it bled... this thing was **real** ."

Splinter drew in a breath. "After my return to Japan I studied up more on the phenomenon. I learned that the occurrence of mind creatures are not restricted to those created by conscious thought. In some recorded cases they have emerged from the fears of a group of people or from the strong imagination of a single person. Though mind creatures are usually seen and unable to physically touch the living sometimes they are tangible."

"If that is true, Sensei," Leo said. "Then where did Neikan come from?"

"From your minds."

The turtles looked at one another and then back to their master, unwilling to believe what they were hearing.

"I don't understand," Raphael said. "How could we have made this thing?"

"Through the course of your training you have learned to control your animal instincts," the rat said. "I believe that this creature is the physical manifestation of those instincts."

"Master..?" Don slid off the bed and Leonardo helped him to sit in the circle. "When I was fighting this thing... I couldn't touch it. I mean... I couldn't hurt it."

"But you thought you killed it," Raph said.

"I couldn't touch it..." Don continued, "Until I let myself get angry. I... I'm sorry, Sensei, but I acted like an animal, I fought like an animal. It was only then that I was finally able to injure it. It least, I **thought** I injured it..."

"You did injure it," Splinter said. "But not in the way you believe. In reclaiming your animalism you effectively weakened the creature."

Leonardo flexed his muscles. "So we have to fight Neikan on its own level? We have to **act** like it to get rid of it?"

"I am afraid so."

"But that isn't what you taught us, Master," Mike said. "I mean... where is the honor in that?"

Splinter slid to the center of the circle, putting one hand on Mike's and one on Don's. "You were born as animals, you **are** animals."

"We're well aware of that, Sensei," Raphael said. "We're reminded of that every time we look at one another or in a mirror. It isn't like it is a fact we can forget. That still doesn't say how we are supposed to beat this thing."

" **You** ," Leonardo said, looking at his angered brother, "You've been aware of its presence from the beginning. You knew it was near when the rest of us had no idea."

"Indeed," Splinter said, putting a hand on Raphael's shoulder. "You may have more part in this creature than do the others."

Raphael stood and bounded across the room, looking over at the others with anger visible in his face. "I am **not** responsible for this damn thing!"

"Calm down, Raph!" Leo yelled, jumping to his feet. "Weren't you listening? Sensei said that it was an **accident** , a side-effect from our training." He stepped up to his brother and looked him in the eye. "You may be the only one of us that can **do** anything about it."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about this?" Raph snapped.

"No, it's supposed to drill it through your head that you have a job to do," he looked over his shoulder at the others. "We **all** do. And I suggest we get to it."

"Can't we just dissolve it?" Mike asked. "Like Splinter's teacher did?"

"That took months," Leo said. "The way I see it, Neikan can wait forever, but we can't. We have to leave this room eventually, and when we do it will be there waiting for us."

Raphael leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. "Fine. Let's get this son of a bitch."

Mark got up and walked to the far side of the room, sitting in the corner by the medicine chest. He hugged his legs and rested his head against his knees, pressing his hands to his eyes. He had trusted these people and now he knew that it was they who were responsible for the thing that had killed his friend and nearly himself as well. But they had saved his life, protected him... he didn't know what to think, how to feel. A touch landed on the back of his head and he jumped, looking up.

"Hey," Mike said, sitting on the floor with considerable effort. "How are you doing?"

"I can't believe this is happening..."

"I know," Mike said softly. "Me neither. I... I'm sorry. You and your friend never should have gotten mixed up in this."

"We shouldn't have been in the sewer," Mark said, wiping away the tears with the back of his hand. "I shouldn't have wanted so damn bad to be in that club..."

Mike patted the teen on the back. "It wasn't your fault... I don't even know if it's **our** fault. Maybe it's nobody's."

"But it still happened..." Mark began to cry again. "Jesus... are we ever going to get the hell out of here?"

Michaelangelo pulled the kid over to him and the boy rested his head on the offered green shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it," Mike said. "We aren't going to let anything happen to you."

Across the room all of the others were sitting on the floor with their eyes closed. Their legs were folded and their posture impeccable as they sat perfectly still.

"What are they doing?" Mark asked, taking his head off of Mike's shoulder.

"Meditating," the turtle said. "Getting ready."

"Do you guys always do that before you fight something?"

"Not always... but definitely right now."

The human looked at Michaelangelo. "Why aren't you doing it?"

Mike gave him a crooked smile. "I started to but I figured you needed to get ready, too. Thought you might need a friend."

"I don't think I'm ever going to be ready for this," Mark said. "But thanks."

"No problem."

Mike looked at his brothers and Master as they sat silently, preparing for the battle ahead. But what kind of battle would it be? According to Splinter they were supposed to let go of their training, to basically go animal. It was obvious that Raphael would be on the firing line, the first defense against something that was neither real nor unreal. Mike hoped that his brother would be able to face the thing and come out of the encounter alive.

Raphael turned his sai over in his hand and watched the light glint off it. It had always been his weapon of choice, even since his youth - but it hadn't been the first thing that he'd ever used to kill. That came when he had wandered to the city streets, unarmed and simply curious about the way humans lived. What he discovered was that they lived like he and his brothers - from day to day, fighting to stay alive. Some teens, eight years his senior at the time, had come across him while he ducked through the alleys. They were a gang, that much was certain from the way they dressed and acted. They thought that Raph was some kind of freak, a monster. When he spoke they got frightened and came at him with knives.

Back then he was in even less control of his animal side. It wasn't as if turtles were the most vicious creatures in nature, but the survival instinct is as strong among them as it is most other living things - and the instinct whispered into Raphael's mind that he needed to fight. Drawing on what limited training he had at the time, he leapt into their midst and began to defend himself. Defense became ferocity and he let loose, forgetting everything he had learned from Splinter up to that point. All the gang members ran off when they finally saw just how ferocious this *freak* really was - all but one. Raphael still had his bare hands wrapped around the human's throat - but the human was dead. Raph let go of his neck and felt and heard the bones in the strangers neck as they scraped together - fragments left from where the neck had snapped.

He had killed someone with his bare hands, nothing more - and in his fury he hadn't even known he had done it until it was over. If that was what it was like to be an animal, to fight with no other concern than for that of your own life - he didn't want that. But the years had done little to temper him, to calm him to a logical being in the face of battle. He still fought with a rage, as Michaelangelo had once referred to him, Kamikaze.

" *Damn the torpedoes...* " he whispered, laying his sai down on the concrete. " *Full speed ahead.* "

"Good quote. I've got another one for you."

Raphael looked up at Mike. "What's that?"

Michaelangelo sat down and picked up his brother's sai. " *There is some soul of goodness in things evil, would men observingly distil it out.* "

"Who said that?"

"Shakespeare. *Henry the Fifth* ."

Raph sighed and looked over at Donatello who lay on the bed, asleep again. "You really think there's any good in Neikan? After what he did to you guys I don't see how..."

"Maybe evil was the wrong word," Mike broke through. "Like Splinter said... its an animal."

"Yeah... what we were meant to be."

"No, not really," he handed his brother back his weapon. "But I guess it's a part of us and all that."

"And if we... If I kill it, do you think that part of us will go away, too?"

"Geez... I hope not."

Raph looked at his brother. "You're telling me that you **want** that part of you? The vicious, murdering..."

"...The part that keeps you fighting for life even after your logical mind tells you that there is no way in hell you are going to get out of *this one* alive..?" Michaelangelo said, half grinning.

Raph cleared his throat. "Yeah... that one."

"I need it. You do, too."

"But I don't **want** it! I've been fighting for years to make it go away, to level myself and keep my life at an even keel. But it never works... I keep coming back to *me* ."

Mikey put a hand on his brother's arm. "And *you* have pulled us out of more shit than I can remember. If you weren't the short fuse we've all come to know and love, the chances are that none of us would even **be** here today. You need that part of you. I need that part of **me** ." he motioned to their brothers. "They need it."

"That's easy for you to say. When was the last time **you** went berserk?"

Mike scratched around the bandage on his arm. "It happens. Maybe not as often as for you... but I guess your button is just easier to find."

"You could be right about that."

"Now... do you think you can handle Neikan?"

"You bet your ass I can," Raphael said in an almost soft tone. He passed his sai back to Mike. "Here... I'm not going to need this."

Michaelangelo slid the weapon into his belt. "I'll keep it here just in case."

"Ready?"

"No."

"Me, neither."

"Let's go."

They both stood, walking to where the others had congregated around Donatello's bed. Leo looked at them and nodded, then turned towards Splinter and kneeled. Raphael looked at Mike and they each lowered to a knee, offering the greatest respect to their sensei. Splinter bowed gently in return, hoping that the emotion behind his sons' actions was not the fear that it would be their last chance to pay him such an honor. They stood and Leo put a hand on Mark's shoulder.

"Take care of Don," he said.

Mark nodded and tried to smile. "Good luck," he said weakly.

The turtles walked together towards the infirmary door and paused for only a second before Leonardo unlatched it and turned the knob, swinging it open. They had half-expected Neikan to be right there, waiting for them to emerge. There was an audible trio of relieved sighs when they discovered that it was not, in fact, ready to pounce - nor anywhere in sight.

"Master," Leo said without looking away from the room ahead. "Don't forget to latch the door."

They stepped full out and the door swung shut behind them. A couple seconds later they heard the latch being fastened and Leonardo looked to Michaelangelo, who stood on his right.

"You sure you can handle this?" he asked. "You've already been through hell..."

"No, Donny went through hell," Mike said. "I was nowhere near it."

Leonardo nodded and drew a single sword, stepping ahead. His brothers followed him, each keeping observant to his own side of the room. At the front door Leo paused again, looking over at Raphael this time. The *eldest* ninja was no longer so certain about sending his brother into battle alone with Neikan and he suddenly found himself searching his mind for other options. None came to him.

"Raph... I know I said that it was your show, but if you don't think you can do it..." Leonardo said.

"I can do this. You guys just jump in if I start looking dead."

Leo stepped aside and his brother took the point, opening the door to the lair and leading the others into the pitch black tunnel. Their eyes adjusted quickly, trained to do so from years of stepping from the shadows to the light and back again. Still, there was only so far they could see, only so many shapes that could be made out against the shaded walls. Something scurried across the dirt three meters ahead of them and they all looked, watching yet another rat as it ran for cover. The ninjas shared another collective sigh of relief and began to walk forward slowly.

" *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate,* " Mike whispered after a couple minutes of silence.

"What?" Raphael asked.

"Dante..."

Leonardo cleared his throat gently. " *Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,* " he translated.

"Oh," Raphael tightened his fist as they came to a junction. "I liked it better in French."

"Latin," Michaelangelo corrected him.

"Whatever."

A chill traveled up his spine and he froze, looking at his siblings' faces. They knew what he was feeling, they could see it in his eyes - Neikan was near.

"Against the wall," Raph commanded and he and the others pressed themselves to the concrete. "Okay... let it get a little closer..."

Leo suddenly felt a rush of fear for his brother and reached out, putting a hand on his arm. "I can't let you do this," he whispered. "I know it's what Splinter said had to be done, but it doesn't seem right... like tossing you into the lion's den."

"I don't know much about the bible," Raph whispered back. "But didn't Daniel survive on faith?"

"That was a different kind of faith," Leo said, tightening his grip. "We're talking about you abandoning everything that you've been taught and fighting Neikan on its own terms... like it or not, you are **not** that much of an animal."

"Yes I am," he replied, looking past Leo at Mike, recalling their earlier conversation. "And so are the two of you. Trust me, Leo... I think I understand now."

"Understand what?"

He smiled and looked at Mike again. "Shakespeare."

Leo released his brother's arm. "If it gets too hairy I'm in it."

"Me, too," Michaelangelo said.

"You'd better be..."

"We've got your back," Leo told him, gripping tightly to his sword.

Raph looked at the weapon tucked into his brother's belt. "Y'know... on second thought, give me that sai."

Mike drew the blade and spun it, pressing the handle into Raphael's palm. "Change of heart?"

"I just remembered something Splinter said while you were out of it," the turtle said, enjoying the feel of the leather in his grip. "About animals using tools."

Raphael stepped away from the wall and looked down the tunnel. Two large white eyes stared at him from the darkness. They shifted and then started moving ahead slowly. Neikan had been waiting for him to come into sight - to step into the open. It wasn't hunting him, it was challenging him. Like a wolf vying for territory, a test to see who was most worthy to hold this place - a test that Raphael was determined to win. He spun his sai and positioned the trio of blades so they jutted out from between his folded fingers, like claws drawn for the attack. He crouched and put a hand on the ground, waiting for the creature to get near enough.

"Neikan..." he said, hissing the word.

"...Animal people..." it replied in a deep, gurgling voice.

Raphael launched himself forward, his sai aimed for the point between the creature's white eyes. It jumped back, a move that Raphael had anticipated and prepared for. He landed flat on his feet and sprung up, flipping behind the creature and pulling into a kick, which contacted with Neikan's back. It turned around and reached out for the turtle with its talons, swiping the air just centimeters above his head. He took the opportunity provided by the miss and jumped ahead, grabbing for the thing's throat. Raph gripped it with one hand and drew back with his sai in the other, but the blood still flowing from the lifeless creature's wounded gullet made his hold slip and his aim faltered.

Neikan grabbed Raphael by the arm and tossed him aside, roaring in anger. The turtle landed upright and wasted not a single second in launching himself back at the thing. It was getting easier, the animal instincts - Raph had almost managed to let go of all his logic and

strategy for a moment, and in that moment he had nearly been able to run the thing through. He screamed out and spun his sai, driving it into his enemy's arm. He fell forward, still holding onto the sai. Scrambling, he looked around at the creature. He hadn't touched it, he and his weapon had gone clear through it as if it weren't there. Raphael growled - this wasn't going to be quite so easy, after all.

In the shadows the other two turtles watched and waited, honoring Raphael's request that they not step in until it looked like there were no way for him to win. So far he had been holding his own, fighting the creature on its own terms and seemingly leaving neither combatant one-up upon the other. Leo held his sword to his plastron and gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to jump in. He wasn't accustomed to watching one of his brothers go up against such a threat alone - and he was there and completely able to help. He took a step forward but stopped, feeling Mike's touch on his arm.

"Let him try," Mike said, resisting his own urge to barge in on the fight. "Give him a chance... if we go in on this now we could blow it."

Leonardo let out a breath and stepped back, setting his eyes again upon the fight within the shadows. Raph and Neikan were both jumping back and forth, once in a while coming together for a short hand-to-hand bout that always ended in one or the other getting thrown against a wall or to the ground. Now it was even hard to tell which was turtle and which was tulpa - but they knew that Raphael was still in the fight, which meant there was still hope.

Raph wiped the blood from his lip and stood, clenching his fists. He no longer held his sai, having lost it one of the times that he had been thrown against the wall. But he didn't need his weapon, his body and his mind - and his instincts - those were the only weapons he had, the only ones that he felt he now needed. The turtle looked off to the side and saw his brothers still standing against the wall, their desire to help him visible even in the near darkness. He grinned and then looked back to Neilkan, who stood a body's length away, breathing heavily its unreal breaths. He looked into its eyes and

stepped back, a rush of cold moving from his feet to the top of his head.

Something's wrong, he thought, taking a deep breath.

The creature turned from him, looking towards his brothers. Raph gritted his teeth. He decided not to give Neikan the opportunity to get to them and folded himself forward into a roll, springing himself up at the end of it and spinning a kick at its head. It caught him by the foot and twisted - Raphael's ankle bone snapped. He fought back a cry of pain and spun up with the other foot, impacting the creature squarely in the face.

It dropped him and he slid back, away from its immediate reach. But its reach was longer than he had anticipated and it came down upon him, pulling him up by the throat. Raphael opened his mouth to call out for his brothers to join in the fight but could not make a sound as Neikan squeezed tighter. The turtle's attention shifted to the thing's other hand, which was pulled back, its claws extended. He saw the hand begin to swing towards him and closed his eyes, waiting for contact.

Leonardo jumped back as a spattering of warm, thick fluid hit his face. He reached up and wiped it away, looking at the dark red that coated his palm. His eyes widened and pressed one of his blood-covered fingers to his tongue - it tasted metallic. Donatello had told them that Neikan's blood tasted plainer than water, that it was unreal - this blood was not Neikan's. Without looking to see if Michaelangelo was following, Leonardo pushed away from the wall, holding his sword high. Before him was stillness, silence - the creature's white eyes did not stare out from the darkness, the battle was ended. He lowered his blade and looked to his side where Mike stood with his nunchaku at the ready.

Michaelangelo let his arm swing down and looked into Leo's eyes. "Where the hell are they?"

Leonardo looked into the darkest shadows ahead of them and took a step forward. His feet froze themselves into place and he glared intently at the shadow's terminator, where it joined on the dirt with the relative lightness of the area where they stood. Just barely within view lay Raphael. Without regard as to whether Neikan was waiting for them there, Leo and Mike sprung into the shade, grabbing hold of Raphael's arms and pulled him into the light. Leo's eyes closed and he dropped his sword, turning his face.

"Jesus Christ!" Mike yelled out, falling down beside his brother.

Raphael's plastron had been punched through, shattered at the center. Blood pooled in the wound and ran down what was left of his chest plate, soaking into the dirt below him. His eyes were open, his mouth quivering as he tried to speak. Leonardo kneeled and put a hand on the center of the wound, pressing down as he tried to stop the bleeding.

"...It... didn't work..." Raphael forced out.

Mike 's eyes were flowing with tears and he put a finger on Raph's throat, feeling his pulse. "Don't worry..." he sobbed. "C'mon, we'll get you fixed up..."

Leonardo stood and swung, punching the concrete wall. " **Neikan, you son of a bitch!** " he screamed down the tunnel. He bent over and picked up his katana, sliding it into its sheath, and turned back to his brothers. "We can't carry him like this," he said to Mike. "Go back to the den... get the stretcher!"

Mike stood and stepped back, keeping his eyes on Raphael.

"Now!" Leo yelled. "Hurry!"

The turtle spun and ran down the tunnel, towards the den, and Leonardo kneeled down once again by Raphael's side.

"..Leo..." Raph coughed and the blood flowed out faster for a moment.

"Don't talk," Leonardo said, putting a hand on his brother's chest. "Just... just hang on... we'll get you back to the den and..."

"... It didn't work... not... not with me," Raph said. He reached up and put a slick hand on Leonardo's face.

"Just hang on..." Leo said, trying to sound strong though tears were falling down his cheeks.

"...There wasn't enough of me..." he said, blinking hard.

Leonardo looked into his brother's eyes. "Jesus, Raph... what the hell are we supposed to do?"

"...You're... as tame as ... they come..."

Leo pulled his brother near and pressed a hand harder against to his plastron. The blood wasn't flowing quite so fast now. Raphael's head rolled to the side and his eyes closed; Leonardo shook him gently.

"Raph..? Raph, come on..." he said softly. He shook him harder and yelled, "Don't do this to me!"

Leonardo drew his brother up into his arms and rocked him back and forth. He let out a shaky breath and wiped the blood off of the other turtle's cheek with the clean back side of his hand then patted it gently with his palm.

"Raph..."

Continued in Chapter Five

CH 5

Something Wicked

Chapter Five

Leo laid his brother back down on the sewer floor and looked at his own hand. He turned his palm down and flexed his three fingers into a fist. Through the blood he could see skin, dark green and rough... inhuman. He could remember what it was like before the change, before the decent into the sewers - before the adoption of humanity. They had always been animals, even when they thought themselves so superior to their primitive roots. But even animals could grieve.

The ninja wiped his face, smearing Raphael's blood across his features. "You're right," Leonardo whispered to his unmoving brother. "Neikan was created out of what we denied... but you never denied it. You accepted it."

Leonardo reached behind his back and drew his katanas, staring at them and the blood-covered face that reflected in their metal. He still saw the humanity behind his eyes, but on the outside it was more obvious that he was a creature... a thing meant to live by instinct. But he still felt it - he still had his honor, his strategy, his logical mind. Those things he had fought for every day since the time when he and his brothers had begun this life.

Leo laid one of his swords on Raphael's bloody plastron then brought the other one up to his own head, sliding the blade under his mask and slicing through the blue fabric. It fell away, landing on the dirt. He laid the sword across the other one and stared for many long seconds at the *X* they formed. He stood and slipped the pads from off his arms and legs, then did likewise to the bands of leather wrapped around his wrists. Finally, he removed was his belt and sheaths, almost fearing what would be left of his human self when they were gone. What he felt was anger and sadness - the same as

he had felt as when he had them on. A tear escaped his eye, leaving a trail of green through the still-wet blood on his face.

"I'm going now," he whispered.

He turned his back to Raphael, walking away. He could hear Mike's voice far behind him, growing nearer - but Leo would not be there - he would not return to the den. Not to bring Raphael home, nor to offer supporting words to his brothers that still lived. He would not go back for the turtle's rites, nor for his interment. If it took the last fragments of his life and humanity, he would not return until Neikan was dead.

"Here! Come on!" Michaelangelo yelled as he and Splinter grew nearer to the place where the turtle had left his brothers. "Hurry, Master!"

Michaelangelo was having trouble keeping a steady pace, so Splinter ran on ahead, taking long, bounding steps towards the point where his son had indicated. With a final, determined leap, the rat landed by Raphael's side and kneeled down, pressing a hand to the turtle's blood-coated throat. Mike slid to a stop beside them and unrolled the fabric-and-aluminum constructed stretcher that he had been carrying from the den. He looked around and then down at the swords that were placed so carefully on the fallen turtle's plastron.

"Master..?" Mike said, picking up the katanas. "Where's Leo?"

Splinter reached over and picked up his missing son's mask then looked at Michaelangelo. "He is gone."

Mike's mouth fell open. "Jesus, Master... please, don't say that... I wasn't gone that long..."

"No," Splinter clarified. "He left."

"But... why would he leave Raph here like this?"

"Perhaps he believed him to be dead."

Mikey touched his brother's wrist. "Do you think we can do anything?"

"We must return him to the den immediately."

Mike let out a breath and spun the swords, sliding them between his shell and belt. They took up positions and lifted Raph onto the stretcher, then Splinter picked up the pads and belt and laid them atop Raph's chest, carefully avoiding the fresh wound.

"I hope Leo knows what he's doing, Master," Mike said, lifting his end of the stretcher.

"As do I..."

Leonardo looked ahead of him at the empty, dark tunnel. He had been walking for nearly an hour and had found no trace of Neikan. It had seemed like the right thing to do at first, but now he wasn't so certain. He wondered if he should have at least kept one sword in hand - or sought out Raphael's missing sai. He glanced down at his own hands and saw how plain they were... Neikan had claws - another example of its feral state. Leo's own body was strong and flexible, but he was nowhere near as adapted for survival as Neikan was.

The ninja's face was stiff - he flexed his features and the dried blood cracked. He kneeled down and dipped his hand in the murky water, bringing up a palm full and splashing himself in the face. Raphael's blood dissolved away, dripping into the sewer water and leaving red rings on the surface. He glared at the reflection of his own face and then shifted his gaze upward, back towards the shadows - a tugging at the back of his mind urging the fact that he was no longer alone.

Leo let his eyes dig deep into the darkness ahead, searching for the creature that he could feel at that moment. It was in the depths

somewhere, staring at him and waiting. He stood and jumped up, taking hold of a thick pipe and swinging himself up. A pain seared his back, reminding him of the first time he had really faced up against Neikan, just hours before. At that time he had not been able to touch it at all - this time he swore to himself that the battle field would be even. He crouched on the rusted metal and looked even deeper into the shadows.

"What's wrong?" Leo asked. "Afraid to show yourself?"

Two white eyes slid into view and shifted to the side, as if Neikan were pondering its enemy's words. It let out a fluid growl and stomped, splashing the sewer water. Small waves rolled into the light and glanced off the concrete walls.

"...Animal people..." it hissed.

Leo bared his teeth. "You're half right..."

"I can't believe he just took off like that," Donatello yelled. He wobbled and Mark put a hand under his elbow, holding him up. "What the hell is he thinking?"

"Take it easy, Donny," Mike scolded, sitting up on the bed. "He's going after Neikan."

Don shoved Michaelangelo back down on his shell. "Lay still!" he commanded, checking the needle in Mike's arm. "Or this isn't going to work."

Raphael lay on a bed next to Mike's, a needle protruding from his own arm. Between the two turtles there was a length of tubing that flowed through with blood that was being pumped by a jerry-rigged device vaguely resembling a fish tank aerator. Despite the pump's simplistic appearance, it seemed to be working and the transfusion had been thus-far successful. Donatello's fingers were busy at work stitching up the punctured artery in Raphael's chest.

Mike sighed and looked up at the cracked ceiling. He was thankful that Don's studies had included medical treatments beyond the basic first aid that they all had learned from their Sensei. After his encounter with Neikan, Don shouldn't have even been standing and it amazed them all that he was able to do so without passing out. He was still in great pain from the torture he had gone through at the tulpa's hands, but he held it back and tried to hide it, wearing a funereal expression for Raphael and nothing for himself. Donatello's body was covered with wounds of his own - all bandaged but still bleeding through the gauze. Nobody liked the idea of him being up and about but it was the only possible solution at the moment - Splinter did not have such extensive medical training and Michaelangelo's blood was the only thing keeping Raphael alive. Even the deep gouge in Don's palm did not keep his fingers from performing the delicate task of repairing his brother's artery.

"How's he doing?" Mark asked, biting on his lip.

"Good... I hope," Don said as he removed a pair of surgical clamps from the vessel. He handed the clamps to Splinter and then held his breath as he removed the other pair. He let out the breath when he saw that no blood seeped through the stitching. "He's damn lucky Neikan didn't get his heart."

Mark stared at Raph's foot. "What's wrong with his ankle?" he asked.

Don looked over at the distorted limb for only a moment before returning his sights to the situation at hand. "It may be broken," he said. "But I have more important things to take care of right now. I'll worry about that as soon as I get this finished."

Mark nodded and stepped back.

"I'm getting light-headed," Mike said, playing with the tube between him and his brother.

Don slapped his hand and checked the needle again. "I'll take it off in a second."

Mark rubbed the center of his forehead and turned to Splinter. "Do you think Leo's okay?"

Splinter set the surgical clamps down on a metal tray and patted Don on the arm, looking him in the eye.

"I can handle it, Master," Donatello said between clenched teeth. "I'll holler if I need you."

The rat nodded and took the young human by the elbow, leading him to the mattress. Leonardo's swords lay upon the sheets and Mark sat down beside them, joined a moment later by the aged rat.

"It didn't work for Raph," the boy said softly. "Do you think it'll work for Leo?"

"I may have been correct about this creature's origin," Splinter said, "but I am afraid there was far too little of Raphael's animalism in Neikan."

Mark looked up at him curiously. He hadn't known the ninja master long, but he could tell that there were not many instances that Splinter had been mistaken about something - and it shone in the old one's eyes that it disturbed him greatly that he was incorrect this time.

"But Leo... he seems so... I dunno'... level-headed," Mark said.

"Yes... and that is why he may be the only one able to best the creature.," Splinter said haltingly. "Of all my sons he has been the one most determined to cast aside his animal instincts - he has time and again shown that he no longer considers himself an animal. If Neikan was created from what my children have denied themselves, it stands to reason that there is much more of Leonardo in this creature than of any of the others." He looked across the room at Raphael. "It is unfortunate that I did not realize so sooner."

Splinter stood and put a furry hand on Mark's shoulder, then walked away. He lowered himself to the floor, crossing his legs. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, beginning to meditate. Mark watched him for a while then turned his face to the side, looking at the pair of katanas there on the mattress. He picked one up and waved it back and forth, watching the light glint off the blade.

After many long minutes, Leonardo jumped off the pipe, flipping in the air and landing on his feet, trying his best to fight back the sting in his back. He crouched again, bringing the water up to his chest. Neikan took a step forward then let out a low growl and stepped back. Leo watched it, trying to sort out the action.

No... not logic, the turtle thought, *Instinct...*

The ninja leapt forward, grabbing at the thing's head. It looked at him as he came near and deflected the attack, elbowing Leo in the face. The turtle rolled with the strike and flipped onto his shell in shallower water, kicking Neikan behind the knee. The creature fell back and Leo slid aside just before it would have landed on him. It howled out in anger and shifted to its knees, not bothering to get to a better position before striking back. That was an advantage to Leonardo, who sprung to his feet and jumped over the hastily delivered attack. He landed behind the creature and jumped onto its back. There was a thump when they contacted - the sound of plastron hitting shell.

...A turtle... Leo reminded himself. *Mike said it's a turtle...*

Leonardo reached around Neikans head and dug his fingers into its eyes. It howled and the ninja felt the soft membranes slide loose beneath his fingertips. The creature reached behind itself and grabbed the top edge of the turtle's shell. Leo's grip was wrenched loose and he felt himself flying through the air; he hit the wall with his shoulder and heard a pop as the bone dislocated itself from the socket. He crumpled to the floor then sprung back to his feet and looked ahead, glaring at the dark form stalking towards him. It stepped into the light and Leo gritted his teeth.

It **was** a turtle - its skin grey-green and its shell black and cracked. Its long limbs and emaciated muscles made it seem incapable of the feats of strength and agility it had displayed. The skeleton-like arms ended in three-fingered hands - its claws were nothing more than the creature's bones thrust through the tips. There was a gaping hole in Neikan's throat that still flowed with un-living blood; the fluid oozed down the center of the dark brown plastron and dripped into the sewer water. There was a gash on the center of its head and one of its eyes hung eerily against its cheek, having been forced loose by Leo's attack a few moments before. Blood pooled in the empty socket and flowed down its face, into its open mouth. Neikan's black tongue slid out from between its large, flat teeth and licked away the fluid.

Leo backed up a step and felt his carapace hit the wall. He took a deep breath and swung his shoulder hard into the concrete - the bone popped back into the socket. Leo's eyes twitched but he made no verbal confirmation of the pain. He shook his arm and flexed his hand, turning full towards the tulpa. Somehow it seemed more real now - no longer an echo from a distant nightmare. It was pure - focusing on a single objective: survival.

And now, so was Leonardo.

Mike sat on the edge of the bed and leaned forward, putting his head between his knees.

"I told you not to try and get up yet," Donatello scolded. He was standing a meter away, just finishing the splint on Raphael's ankle . "Next time maybe you'll listen to me."

"Shut up... you shouldn't be standing, either," Mikey said as he glanced over at where Splinter sat in meditation. "You think Leo's okay?"

Don limped to his brother and let out a breath. "He can take care of himself."

Michaelangelo looked at Raphael and then into Don's eyes. "How's Raph doing?"

"He's stable... as far as I can tell. He lost a lot of blood, but thanks to you he'll probably make it."

"How's his ankle?"

"We can't be sure of how it's going to heal. We don't exactly have the luxury of an x-ray machine down here... hopefully it'll knit straight enough so he can stand on it."

Mike nodded and stared at the reddened bandage on Raphael's chest. "What about his plastron?"

Don sighed, folding his arms. "If it were a solid piece punched in there might be less to worry about. I think I got all the fragments out... I hope."

"That kind of thing doesn't grow back, does it?"

"No. And that's a bad place to leave unprotected."

"Right over the heart," Mike said.

"Scar tissue will eventually cover the flesh underneath, but down the road we'll have to think about armoring the area somehow."

"Armoring?" Michaelangelo looked a little confused. "Like with metal?"

"Perhaps. Leaving it unprotected would be like painting a bull's-eye over his heart."

Neither one of them admitted out loud was that Raphael's life as a ninja was virtually over. He would be unable to pivot or lift on his ankle and his artery would be at risk of bursting with any great amount of strain put upon it. That, in addition to his unprotected chest, meant that he would be unable to fight with any effectiveness.

The greatest fear that the brothers shared was that Raph would be unable to accept that situation when he woke up. **If** he woke up.

"How are **you** doing?" Mikey asked, looking at Donatello's distant expression.

"What do you mean?"

Mike slid over, motioning for his brother to join him on the bed. Don did so reluctantly and slowly, biting back a sound of pain as he lifted himself up. He folded his hands on his lap and stared down at them.

"Neikan hurt you.," Michaelangelo continued.

"I'll be fine," Donny said. "My wounds are a lot less severe than Raphael's..."

"That's not what I mean," Mike cut in. "And you know it."

"I know what you mean," Don told him, trying not to raise his voice. "And I told you *I'll be fine* ."

Mike shook his head. "Don't even try to lie to me, I've known you too long."

Donatello looked away. "I don't want to talk about this right now."

Michaelangelo put a hand on Don's cheek and guided his face around. A tear slipped from the corner of Don's eye and the scholarly turtle reached up, wiping it away with the back of his hand. Mike didn't try to put words to the situation, instead wrapping his arms around his distressed brother and pulling him into an embrace. Don returned the hug, his body shaking as he cried. Mike touched the back of the other's head and patted softly as he felt tears fall onto his shoulder.

"I'm here, man... don't worry," Mike said, his own voice bleeding with emotion.

Don didn't speak, but held his brother as tightly as his weakened arms could manage. So many times, through so many battles they had survived. They had gone around the world and had even left it, challenging powerful enemies every step along the way. They hadn't always won, but they had always survived. There was a certain macabre irony to the fact that their most formidable enemy had emerged so close to home - and had been born from their own minds.

Michaelangelo lifted his face and glanced over at Splinter and then towards the mattress on the floor. He felt a sudden rush of panic and pushed Donatello away gently.

"Donny..?" he said in a low voice. "Where's Mark?"

Donatello looked up and wiped his face a second time. Mike's eye ridges were drawn together as he scanned the infirmary, looking suddenly worried. Don's mouth opened and he looked around, as well. He stepped down from the bed and wobbled on his tortured legs. Mike grabbed him by the arm, helping him to stand.

"Where the hell is he?" Don asked.

Michaelangelo slid his feet to the floor and stood, fighting his legs' urge to betray him. "Look," he said, pointing to the mattress and the single katana that lay upon it.

"Damn!" Donatello yelled, stumbling to Splinter and falling to his knees at his side. "Master," he said. "Master, please wake up!"

Splinter's eyes opened and he looked at his son. "What is wrong?" he asked.

"Mark took off," Don said. "I... we didn't notice. Sensei, he's going to get himself killed!"

Mike kneeled as well. "He took one of Leo's swords," he told the aged ninja.

Splinter stood silently and walked to the mattress, picking up the lone weapon. He looked at his sons and they stood, joining him there, each with his head bowed in shame.

"Master, I'm sorry..." Don said, feeling guilty. "I wasn't paying attention... I should have..."

Splinter lifted his chin and put a hand on Don's shoulder. "Do not blame yourself," he said.

"Me and Donny... we can't go after him," Mike said reluctantly. "Master, please... you have to find him. He has no idea what it's like down here."

Splinter handed the sword to Don and slid out of his kimono, then leaned over and picked up Leonardo's belt and a single sheath. He wrapped the leather strap around himself twice and fastened it in the front with a tight knot.

"I'm sorry," Don repeated, handing the sword back to their master.

Splinter took the weapon and slid it into the scabbard. He walked towards the door and turned, bowing to his students as they approached unsteadily. They returned the gesture and the mammal reached behind him, his hand finding the doorknob that had been left unlocked by Mark in his haste to leave. Splinter turned and walked out into the darkened living room as the turtles watched from the door to the infirmary. He did not look back as he left the den, sliding silently into the sewer beyond. Donatello shut the infirmary door and latched it, turning to face his brother.

"I should be with him," Mike said, clenching his fists. "I'm not so bad off."

Donatello walked past him, towards Raphael's sickbed. "You gave a lot of blood," he said, putting a finger on the unconscious turtle's throat and counting out a pulse.

"I can handle it," Mike told him, struggling near.

"Look," Don said loudly, turning around. "I want to go out there and do something about this, too. I don't want anything to happen to Leo or Splinter or Mark any more than you do, but right now the only thing that would happen to either one of us if we went out there is that we would get **killed** !"

"But I'm **fine** ," Michaelangelo said, raising his own voice.

"You gave **a lot** of blood to Raph," Don yelled. "That means that you shouldn't even be on your feet right now. Your body needs time to recover, if you were to go out traipsing around the sewer you'd probably be unconscious inside of five minutes."

Mike sighed and acquiesced. "Okay..." he said. "So what do we do now?"

Don walked around Raphael to the other bed and pulled himself up onto it. "We sit," he said, indicating that the Mike should join him, "and wait."

Mark gripped the handle of the sword and walked forward swiftly. He didn't know where he was going or why he had chosen to leave the safety of the turtles' den, all he knew at that moment was that he could not turn back. Perhaps, he thought, he would be able to return the elegant weapon to its proper owner - and maybe that it would mean the difference between death and survival for the ninja. Maybe he was doing just what needed to be done.

...Maybe I'm just crazy... he thought.

Unfamiliar noises found his ears and he jumped at the slightest of them. One sound was a low rumble, almost like a growl. He stopped and held his breath, listening more intently. The sound was coming from above him - the sound of cars on the road that was the sewer's ceiling.

Mark looked up at a manhole cover. Light streamed through the holes - it was daytime up there. But it was always nighttime down below, he realized - it was always dark. He didn't like the dark - not any more. He wanted to leave it, to get away from the dangers that hid there. And now there was a way out - a safe path to the real world.

He let out a breath and stepped towards the ladder, putting his hand on it and lifting himself up a step. He could get away from this dank, frightening place now - he could escape and never have to face that awful creature that had stalked them throughout the evening past... he could go home and be safe. If only Ronnie had been so safe, if he had really been afraid of the dark he would still be alive. Mark lifted his other hand and only then remembered that he still held the sword.

The light from the world above glanced off the blade and gave it an almost electrical glow. He put his foot back on the sewer floor and looked up at the manhole again, then lowered his head. He could leave, but these people had helped him - kept him safe and protected even at the cost of their own lives. And now he was prepared to leave without even thanking them or repaying their kindness. Somehow they were so honorable - more than any human he had ever known. More than himself.

Mark closed his eyes and then opened them again, walking once more into the shadows.

" *...Keep me, O Lord...* " he whispered, recalling the 140th Psalm, " *...from the hands of the wicked...* "

Splinter crouched and moved himself along the sewer floor on all fours, sniffing the air for the young human's scent. The only smell was that of blood - and it masked most every other scent about. He stopped and looked at the ground, seeing the teen's footprints imprinted in the dirt. He looked up the way and stood, walking ahead cautiously.

He had protected his children much when they were younger, but that need had diminished since they had come into their own as warriors and as men. But that paternal feeling had never left him - the one that kept him seeking ways to protect them. In this instance there was little that he could do for them that they could not do better, themselves. But Mark... he was a stranger to this world. The human didn't know that death showed itself in many corners.

Though Mark hadn't said so, Splinter knew that Ronnie's death was the first one that the teen had ever seen. The human must have become, like many of his generation, hardened to the thought of death through its romanticized representation as seen through the glass of a television screen. No doubt, before he had come down below, he had seen the end of life as a thing interesting and even fascinating. It was doubtful that Mark held that vision any more, not after seeing *Death* ... the reality. And it was from that fate that Splinter now sought to protect him - the same as he had protected his own sons when they had been as vulnerable.

The ninja stopped and looked down at the young man's footprints where they left the dirt and went down into the water. Splinter glanced around him, back down the tunnel and then ahead at a junction. Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate - attempting to visualize the direction in which Mark had gone. Without the footprints to follow and with the scent of blood negating all others, he would have to rely on the same instincts he had been instructing his children to follow hours before.

His ears twitched and he stepped down into the water, treading to the junction and turning left. He took a few steps and paused, a warning whispering in his ear. He slid beneath the water, only his eyes and nose remaining above the water. He slid on, towards where the monitory feeling had told him he should go. As he did, noises began to drift near - voices. Human... authoritative voices.

Silently as a common rat, he moved ahead. Beams of light illuminated the tunnel several junctions away. He dove beneath the water and swam towards the source, rising to the surface just meters

from the humans. They were police - two of them. The were searching for something, scanning the water and shining their lights onto the nearby ledges.

"Let's forget this," one of them said, stepping onto a low ledge. "I can't find anything."

"What the hell are we looking for, anyway?" the other one asked.

The first shrugged. "A giant *something* ... with big teeth and claws. Some kid reported it a couple hours ago, said that it killed two of his friends..."

The second officer jumped quickly out of the water, landing on the ledge beside her friend. "Let's... uh... let's call animal control in on this one..."

The officers moved towards the ladder and ascended without another word, sliding the lid back onto the manhole after they were fully out. Splinter stood and walked towards the ledge, leaping up onto it. Water dripped from his soaking fur and formed a flowing puddle. This must have been the spot that Mark and his friends had encountered Neikan... and soon there would be more humans down here, searching for the missing teens and swarming ever closer to the mutants' home. More urgently, the humans would run the risk of being Neikan's next victims.

Splinter turned and jumped back into the water, moving quickly back towards the direction from which he had come. First he would return to the den and warn his sons about the humans that would soon be in their midst, then he would seek out Mark. The safety of the intruding humans would be determined by Leonardo - and his exclusive ability to destroy Neikan.

CONTINUED IN CHAPTER SIX

CH 6

Chapter Six

Neikan stared ahead with its one intact eye and reached up, brushing its hand against the other one as it hung limply against its cheek. The tulpa wrapped its long, skeletal fingers around the reddened orb and pulled down, tearing the organ away. It looked at the bloody mass in its hand and threw it at the turtle.

Leo contorted his face into a look of disgust, deflecting the object. *Its not real* , he said to himself. *No blood... no flesh...*

It pushed the back of its hand to the hollow that had once held its eye, hissing as if in pain. Neikan turned away and hung its head, stepping closer to the shadows that it preferred.

"Did that hurt?" Leo asked, unsure as to why.

The creature stopped and swung around, pondering Leonardo's words. He had its attention now - it almost seemed to understand. He took a deep breath and continued.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, gathering courage and stepping closer. "Why did you take Donny and keep him alive? Why did you kill Raph?"

Neikan took a step forward and glared at the ninja.

"Why didn't you kill everyone when you had the chance?" Leo went on, anger in his voice. "You could have gone into the den and killed them all when the door was open... but you let them live. You let **me** live. **Why** ?"

It slid towards him and held out a bloody hand. Leonardo stumbled back and stared at the tulpa, preparing to deflect any threatening move. It kept the hand out, held unsteadily a mere twelve inches

from his face. It grunted and turned, walking to a dryer area and lowering itself to the floor. The ninja kneeled and looked it in the face.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"...Animal people..." it said, sounding almost regretful. "...People..."

Michaelangelo limped slowly around the infirmary, his arms folded tightly across his plastron. Don still sat on the edge of one of the sickbeds, watching his brother's circuitous journey about the room. He had gone around five times, each trip slower than the last - and each ending with him standing by the beds, staring angrily towards the door.

"I really wish you'd sit down," Don said, letting out a long breath. "Before you fall down."

Mike stopped before his brother and looked him in the eye, then turned and put a hand on Raphael's wrist.

"It's still out there," he said. "And I ain't going to rest until Leo and Mark and..."

Before he could finish there was a sudden, insistent knock at the door. Don slid to his feet and Michaelangelo ran on ahead. He waited next to the door for his brother to join him, then pushed aside the locks and opened the hatch. Splinter slid into the infirmary and looked into his children's concerned faces.

"Did you find him, master?" Mike asked hopefully.

"Not yet," the rat said. "I needed to return to tell you that there may soon be humans in the area."

"Shit," Mike whispered, shaking his head.

"They're looking for Mark and his friend, aren't they?" Don asked, straightening up as best he could.

"Yes," Splinter said. "I must leave now. Lock the doors and be doubly cautious."

"Yes, Master," the turtles said in unison.

The rat readjusted his belt and sword and backed out of the room, then turned and leaped through the living room and out the front door. Donatello and Mike stepped out of the infirmary and to the front door, which still hung open. They peered outside, but the spry older ninja was already gone far out of sight.

"Now what do we do?" Mike asked.

"We do exactly what Master Splinter told us to do," Don replied.

"But he just said to be cautious - he didn't say we couldn't..."

"You are **not** going out there."

Mike raised his voice. "Look at me... I'm standing, I'm active, I haven't passed out... Donny, I can go out there and help them."

Donatello grabbed him by the shoulders. "Mike, you have **never** gone against Splinter's wishes before... **don't** start now."

"He didn't say anything about not going out there to help," he said, shaking off Don's grip.

"It doesn't matter what he said, we both know what he wants us to do."

"Don..."

" **No!** " Donatello yelled, slamming the door.

Michaelangelo glared at him and pushed him aside, reaching for the doorknob. Don grabbed hold of his wrist, swinging him back around as Mike let out with a punch that contacted his brother's injured arm. Don winced and let go. Mike's mouth fell open.

"I... I'm sorry..." he mumbled. "Donny, man... I forgot..."

The other ninja scowled. "You want to go out there so bad? **Fine** . Go out... do what you damn well want to!"

"I just... I feel like I need to be out there. Like I can help somehow."

Don turned his shell and started walking towards the infirmary. He stopped halfway and spoke without looking back to face Mike.

"Maybe it hasn't occurred to you," he said, cradling his arm, "but if you leave, then me and Raph are by ourselves."

Mike looked at his brother's back and then down at his own hand where it rested on the doorknob.

"Donny, I..."

"I don't like admitting that I'm helpless, Mike," Don interjected. "But you know damn well that I wouldn't be able to defend the both of us should humans or Neikan come by."

Michaelangelo let his hand slip to his side and walked up behind the other turtle, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just... I'm scared."

Don turned. "So am I... and that's why we need to stay together."

Mike breathed deeply and looked at Don's bandaged arm. The blood had begun to seep through the gauze again, where the turtle's fist had met with it.

"Let's change the dressing on this," he said, then looked back towards the door. "But first, let's lock this place down."

Mark took one hesitant step after the other, walking through the shadows without truly knowing where he was bound. Leonardo's sword was still held tightly in the teen's grip, though he had long since grown tired of holding the weapon defensively before him. His arm hung by his side, the tip of the katana occasionally dropping down far enough to scrape against the sewer floor and cause an eerie grinding noise to echo up and down the tunnel.

He heard a sound from ahead and paused in his steps, holding his breath as he listened. He heard it again - an angry, familiar voice. It was Leonardo - yelling. The teen began to tremble and closed his eyes. He was thankful that Leonardo was alive - but the one he must have been yelling at was Neikan. But why was he only yelling? Why wasn't he fighting it?

Mark opened his eyes again and raised the sword. He pressed the blade flat against his chest and crouched down low, slowly making his way forward.

Leonardo doubled his fists and looked down at Neikan.

"Why don't you fight me?" the turtle yelled. "Are you afraid you'll lose? Get on your damn feet!"

The tulpa growled and put its palm on the dirt, brushing it to the side absentmindedly.

Leo gritted his teeth and reached down, grabbing the thing by the neck and hauling it to its feet. He squeezed his fingers tighter, but the thing simply stared at him, making no effort to resist. The ninja made a sound of disgust and let go, pushing Neikan into a wall.

"I've been fighting you for as long as I can remember," Leo said, breathing heavily. "From the very day I was mutated I've been pushing you back and back and I finally thought that you were gone..."

He back-handed the creature across the face. It blinked and continued staring noiselessly.

"...And now you show up in flesh and blood - the living, breathing embodiment of everything in myself that I ever hated..."

He threw a punch that landed against the open wound on the creature's throat.

"...You son of a bitch.... you think I'm going to let you live?"

Leonardo grabbed Neikan by the arm and spun, throwing it into the opposite wall. The tulpa turned, swaying, and grunted.

" **Fight me!** " Leo screamed at the creature.

Neikan looked to its left and sniffed the air. Leonardo was stalking forward for another attack, but stopped and glanced to where the creature was staring. He heard the shuffle of fabric and, for an instant, saw the familiar flash of light against steel. Leonardo and Neikan looked into one another's faces. The tulpa smiled wickedly.

"Shit!" Leo yelled.

The creature pushed him aside and bounded towards the shadows.

In the darkness, Mark could see Neikan coming at him. He tried to breathe, but couldn't. The cords on the sword's handle cut into his skin as his hand gripped it even tighter. He was shaking, uncertain - but somehow managed to hold it out before him. Neikan was only a meter away now - one more step and it would be upon him.

Mark didn't close his eyes, but aimed the end of the sword at the creature's head. A heartbeat later, Neikan was pulled away from its

intended prey. The human watched as Leonardo spun it around and slammed his fist into its gullet.

"Leave him alone!" the ninja hollered as he kicked Neikan in the plastron.

The creature flew backwards and landed on its shell several meters away. It was back on its feet in seconds.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Leo yelled at the teen.

Mark stood and pushed his back to the wall. "I brought your sword," he said, tears in his voice.

"If I needed it, I'd have brought it myself!" he bellowed. "Now get the hell out of here!"

Neikan jumped ahead, clearing the distance to Leonardo and Mark in two bounds. It reached past the turtle, its claws coming to within inches of the teen's face. Leo jammed his finger into the creature's empty eye socket and wrapped his other hand around the back of its head, twisting. It spun with the action and sunk its teeth into Leo's shoulder. The turtle let out a yell of pain, but did not release his grip.

The tulpa ran sideways, smashing Leonardo's already injured shoulder into the concrete wall. He let go and grabbed the front of its plastron, bringing its head down against his knee. It fell back and flipped to all fours, scrambling again towards Mark, who still stood trembling in the shadows. Leonardo followed, but was unable to get to him before the creature.

Mark swung the sword at Neikan and missed it widely. It tore the weapon from the teen's grip, throwing it aside as the clawed fingers closed around his neck. Neikan squeezed and the human tried to pry loose the cold, lifeless fingers with his own. The grip tightened - and Mark's sight began to dim. His arms fell weakly to his sides.

Leonardo jumped on Neikan's shell and dug his fingers into its remaining eye, trying to force it loose as he had done the first. It swung its head back, impacting with Leonardo's brow. The ninja fell to the ground, dazed by the blow. He looked up at the boy that hung helplessly in the creature's grip, then glanced to the dirt and saw the sword where it had been discarded.

The turtle crawled towards the weapon and picked it up - then stood and launched himself at Neikan once again. He reached over the top of the creature's head and grabbed hold of the empty socket, pulling back and extending its neck. He put the katana blade to the already lacerated flesh and pulled it across. The tulpa let out a scream of pain and released Mark, who crumpled to the floor, coughing.

Leonardo did not expect the attack to stop Neikan - and it hadn't. The creature turned and jumped at him, its sharpened fingertips poised to strike the ninja. Leo stepped back and thrust the sword forward - the blade punched through Neikan's plastron, into the soft flesh underneath. Leonardo pulled the katana out and looked at the blood on his blade. A shiver of satisfaction worked its way up his body.

Leo felt the heat of adrenaline as it coursed through his veins - the rush of ferocity that defending his human friend had produced. He couldn't breathe anymore, he didn't need to. All thoughts left him as he pulled far back into himself - the pain in his arm and back were gone. All he felt any more was anger - and strength... incredible strength. He looked at Neikan - for the first time on its own terms.

The tulpa stumbled forward and slashed Leonardo's face with its claws, breaking through the skin and digging into the muscle. The ninja smiled - all he could feel was the heat. He dropped the sword and jumped on top of the creature, slamming his fist into its throat. It fell back onto its shell and threw him off, flipping to its knees again and charging at him on all fours.

Leo sprung to his feet and kicked Neikan in the head, sending it spinning onto its back. He leaped onto its plastron and grabbed the

flesh where he had slit its throat. He pulled back hard, slamming his other fist into the open wound. He pushed down on the exposed trachea until it collapsed. The tulpa reached its hands up, gripping its throat and fighting to breathe.

The turtle wrapped his hands around Neikan's head and twisted. The sound of the creature's neck snapping echoed off the sewer walls.

Leonardo screamed...

Michaelangelo drew in a sharp breath and his knees buckled beneath him. He threw his hand out, grabbing hold of the edge of the sickbed to keep himself from tumbling to the floor. His heart pounded against the inside of his plastron, aching with each beat. He put a hand to his chest and looked up to where Donatello sat on the bed.

Don held his head tightly in his palms, his body quivering with each breath. He raised his eyes and looked into Mike's face, opening his mouth to speak. He could make no words as his breath caught in his throat. Michaelangelo stood up straight and grabbed his brother's arm.

"What... what the hell was that..?" he asked, his voice rough.

Don coughed and shook his head, trying to clear his mind. "Adrenaline," he said between forced breaths. "An adrenaline rush..."

"How..?" Mike stuttered.

Don slid of the bed and started pacing around the room. He stopped and looked back at Mike.

"Leo... he must have... Jesus Christ, Leo must have done it..."

"Done what?" Mike was having trouble focusing his thoughts.

"He killed Neikan... he did it..."

Michaelangelo looked at Raphael, who was still unmoving. "It doesn't feel right, Donny... I don't... I..."

"I know," Don said, walking to his brother's side. "I feel it, too..."

"Why the hell do we feel like this?"

The scholarly turtle sat down on the floor, rocking back and forth. "I think... oh my god... it got what it wanted... that's what it was trying to do all along..."

"What do you mean?"

"It didn't want to kill us... it never wanted to kill us..."

"What do you mean *it got what it wanted* ?" Mike demanded, kneeling beside his brother.

"It wanted us to reclaim it. It wanted to become part of us again... that's why it didn't kill us when it had the chance... that's why... that's why it kept me alive," he started to shake again. "I did what it wanted me to do. I fought it... it was just waiting for me to fight back..."

"What are you saying?" Mike grabbed his brother by the shoulders and forced him to look into his face. "That it won... that Neikan **won** ?!"

"...I didn't finish it... I didn't do what it wanted me to do..." Don continued.

"If it didn't want to kill us then why the hell is Raph lying over there half dead?" Mike yelled, the adrenaline continuing to course through his body. "Why the hell did it fight him so hard? If it wanted us to kill it, why didn't it just let us do it? Why didn't it just lay down and let us kill it?!"

"It couldn't," Don said.. "It **needed** us to pull part of it away... it needed to be weakened first... like Splinter told us."

Mike looked away. "And we sent Raph in for the slaughter... cause there wasn't enough of him. It just didn't give a damn if he fought back..."

"But Leo... Leo had more part in Neikan than any of us..." Don hung his head. "It was just waiting for him..."

They slid into silence. Mike stood and walked to Raphael's bedside, placing a touch on his unconscious brother's throat. The turtle's pulse was slow, steady - there was no sign in the sleeping ninja's body to indicate that any adrenaline was coursing through his veins. Conversely, the rush to Leonardo's system must have been more intense than either of the remaining turtles had experienced. Michaelangelo looked over at Donatello once again.

"And now what happens to Leo?" Mike asked.

He shook his head, understanding what was being asked. "I wish to hell I knew... I just hope he can control it..."

Mark blinked and rolled. His head was pounding and his throat was rough from where the creature had been holding him in the air. The human took a deep breath and looked over at Leo, who was on his knees, his head held tightly in his hands. He was shaking, fighting for air. Neikan's unreal blood covered him, dripping from his body onto the sewer floor.

Mark looked to where the tulpa lay on the dirty concrete. It's neck was twisted at an odd angle, the vertebrae thrusting out from the hole in its throat. The human felt his stomach churn at the sight and looked away, back at the ninja, who had not moved at all.

"Leo..?" Mark said, barely above a whisper.

The turtle jumped with surprise, but did not look up.

Mark stood, his legs unstable beneath him, and took a shaky step toward Leo. A strong grip on the human's arm pulled him back and he made a noise of alarm, spinning to face whoever was holding him back. He looked down into the concerned face of the turtles' sensei.

"Splinter!" Mark yelled after the initial shock had worn off. "He did it! Leo did it!"

The rat looked at the teen sternly, an expression of concern on his aged face. "Do not approach him," he warned.

"But..." Mark looked at Leo, then back at Splinter again. "Why..? It's over... he killed it. Didn't he?"

Splinter looked him in the eye. "Return to the den at once," he commanded.

Mark opened his mouth to protest, but a monitory glare from the ninja convinced him to do otherwise.

"I... I don't know if I remember the way..." he said, instead.

Splinter released his arm. "Follow your instincts."

Mark nodded and gave Leo a final glance before side-stepping past Splinter. He turned and ran down the tunnel, into the shadows and out of the rat's sight.

Splinter tilted his furry chin up and drew his sword. He looked at it for a few seconds, then threw it as far down the tunnel as he was able. At his feet lay the other sword, still coated with Neikan's blood. He bent over and picked it up, hurling it after the first. The steel blade rang as it glanced off a distant pipe - Leonardo's face shot up.

The turtle's eyes darted back and forth - focusing on nothing, but searching nonetheless. He stumbled to his feet and took a wobbly step forward, his breaths fast and deep. Splinter walked ahead,

never once looking away from his son. A chill went up the rat's spine when he saw the wild, uncontrolled look in Leonardo's eyes.

"M... master..." Leo mumbled, his fists held tight. "What... what's happening... to me..?"

Splinter did not answer. He could sense the furor that was building up within his son - and that Leonardo could not remember how to hold back the instincts. Fifteen years of humanity had been suddenly torn away from his son, and it hurt Splinter to see Leonardo feeling so out of control. Leo had always been so much in control...

The older ninja crouched and glared at the turtle.

"Attack me..." Splinter commanded.

Leo stopped and stumbled back. "Wh... what..?"

" **Now** ! That is an order!"

Leo lowered his head, holding it tightly with his shaking hands. "N...no! Please..."

Splinter leaped ahead, landing just before Leonardo. The aged rat bared his teeth and hissed.

Leo looked up and reached for his master, his hands brushing against the rat's fur. Splinter grabbed his son by the arm and flipped him onto his shell. The turtle sprung to his feet and glared at him.

"W... why are you doing this..?! I don't... want to hurt you..!"

Splinter hated doing this - but he knew it was the only way for Leonardo to overcome the rage that was growing within him. The younger one needed to remember how to control his rages... Splinter took a deep breath and looked his student in the eye.

"If you will not attack," the Master said, "then prepare to defend yourself!"

The rat sprung forward, his fist aimed for Leonardo's already bruised face. The turtle was unable to deflect the blow and took the full force of it to his jaw. He shook his head and his eye ridges drew together. His hands flexed and he stepped forward, drawing in a long, deep breath.

"No!" the turtle yelled. "I will not fight you!"

"Why do you not defend yourself?" Splinter said, pulling into a kick.

The mammal's foot hit Leo's plastron dead-center and the young one flew back. His shell hit the wall and he landed on his feet.

"B... because I choose not to..!" He bowed deeply and lowered himself to his knees, placing his forehead on the sewer floor. "Because I am in control..."

Splinter took a deep breath and stepped ahead, lowering himself to his son's side. He placed a touch on Leo's arm and the turtle looked up. Tears streamed down the young one's face and he wrapped his arms around his master, his body quivering as the adrenaline left him.

"Very good, my child..." Splinter whispered, putting his hand on Leo's head and guiding it onto his furry shoulder.

The ninja master glanced over to where Neikan's illusory body lay. Slowly, the creature faded into the darkness, disappearing from view like a shadow in the night. The blood surrounding them rose into a mist and vanished into the air.

" *Shifu* ..." Leo whispered. "Is... is it over..?"

Splinter held his son closer.

Many minutes had passed since Mark had found his way back to the den, and now he paced around the infirmary, biting his lip as his

mind raced. He stopped and looked towards the turtles, who were watching him in his aimless course. He folded his arms across his chest and sat down on the floor.

"Where the hell are they..?" he asked.

Donatello shrugged, wincing as pain seared through his arm. "They'll be along," he said.

Every wound on the turtle's body hurt worse now that the adrenaline rush had ebbed. He sighed and accepted a pair of Tylenol that Michaelangelo held out to him.

"So... Leo still doesn't know about Raph?" Mike asked the human teen.

He shook his head. "No... I didn't get a chance to tell him."

"I'm just..." Mike paused. "I'm just glad that Neikan is gone."

"Neikan remains," Splinter's voice announced.

The turtles and Mark all turned to see the rat and Leonardo as they stood in the doorway - it had been left unlocked and unguarded after Mark's return to the den. Splinter held the swords in his hand and supported his son with the other arm. Leo looked ragged and weak, but he wore the unmistakable expression that he held reserved for the mourning of a passing enemy. The turtle looked to where Raphael lay on the bed and slid away from the rat's reach, walking to his brother's side and resting a hand on his brow.

"I thought we lost you..." he whispered.

Raphael breathed deeper and his eyelids fluttered. Mark stood and joined the others as they moved to his side and watched anxiously. Raph opened his eyes and looked at each face, then smiled weakly at Leonardo.

"...Did you..?" he asked.

Leo fought back a tear. "Yeah... I did..."

Raph shut his eyes again. "...I knew you would..." he said, drifting back to sleep.

Leonardo turned away, looking into each face that surrounded him. He tightened his jaw and doubled his fists, walking to the center of the room and lowering himself down. He straightened his posture and closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he began to meditate.

Don and Mike looked at their master.

"What... what did you mean when you said that Neikan was still around?" Mark asked. "I saw it with my own eyes... there's no way it could have..."

Mike put a hand on the teen's shoulder.

Donatello looked at Splinter and then down at the floor. "It'll always be around... won't it?"

The ninja master nodded. "Neikan will always be a part of you," he said softly.

Mark looked away, understanding at last what was being said.

"Do you think people are gonna' come this way looking for me?" he asked, trying to shift the subject.

"Maybe," Mike said. "But these sewers are like a maze... they may miss our tunnel entirely."

"We'll bring you back to the surface in a little while," Don said. "But we still need your word not to tell anyone about us."

"You have it... I promise nobody will know about what happened here... or about you guys," he sighed shakily. "Thank you... for everything."

Mark looked over at Raphael and then back towards the others. He didn't know what he was going to tell anyone about how Ron died - but the thought came to him that he should offer up the truth as he understood it: something wicked had been there, but now it was gone.

He looked at Leonardo once again.

No , the human thought, *it isn't gone... but its locked away...*

LOCK AND KEY

(Rush)

I don't want to face

The killer instinct

Face it in you or me

We carry a sensitive cargo

Below the waterline

Ticking like a time bomb

With a primitive design

Behind the finer feelings

This civilized veneer

The heart of a lonely hunter

Guards a dangerous frontier

The balance can sometimes fail

Strong emotions can tip the scale

Don't want to silence

A desperate voice

For the sake of security

No one wants to make

A terrible choice

On the price of being free

I don't want to face

The killer instinct

Face it in you or me

So we keep it under lock and key...

It's not a matter of mercy

It's not a matter of laws

Plenty of people will kill you

For some fanatical cause

It's not a matter of conscience

A search for probable cause

It's just a matter of instinct

A matter of fatal flaws

No reward for resistance

No assistance

No applause...

We don't want to be victims

On that we all agree,

So we lock up the killer instinct

And throw away the key...

The End

I would like to thank you all for reading and reviewing my work!

~AJ~

Breath

This was a short prologue to the story, but I never added it. Now, seven years after writing it, I am finally letting it out. It isn't great, but what the heck, right? I am adding it to the end because it would give away maybe a bit too much at the beginning. Just putting it here for the heck of it.

A breath of air. The touch of water on his skin. It felt like living. This was existence, this was being. And slowly, he became aware. Voices in his head urged him on. Four voices, each different from the other. One voice spoke louder than the rest, fed him more. And he pulled it all in. Those voices, those scents. They touched him, fed him.

He grew…

More and more, they fed him. More and more, they pushed him away. They fought him, hated him, denied him. And, yet, he lived. He lived because they didn't want him. He lived because they thought he didn't exist.

He listened…

The one… the loudest voice. It screamed at him, telling him to leave. It… the voice… it wanted him to leave. It wanted him to leave forever. But that voice made him grow. It made him stronger. How could it make him..? How could he exist..? How could he be..? They didn't want him, so he stayed.

He hated…

That voice… it wouldn't leave him. It whispered, it screamed, it cursed him… it nourished him. He wanted it to stop. He wanted it to leave… that damning voice, that horror that created him.

He sensed…

Blood, now and then… it drifted through the water… the scent met him in the air. And now those words weren't enough to feed him. He needed more. He lived, and to go on living he fed. He found those things with blood. Always, he smelled them as they came near. Small, furry things. Small, scaly things. Warm things. Cold things. Always… always those things with blood…

He changed…

Now, it drew him out. He needed larger things. There were others here, speaking with strange voices. Those voices… not his voices. But they had blood. He could smell it. Different blood. Hot blood. He made his way through the water, through the darkness. He followed the voices. He followed the smell.

He lived…